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## **The Use and Abuse of Socrates in Present Day Teaching**

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**Abstract** The Greek philosopher Socrates is used as an example of a master teacher in in many contexts, from elementary school discussions, to college philosophy classes, to law school. I examine a number of current uses of Socratic teaching, and expose inconsistencies among them. I analyze critically recent practitioners of Socratic teaching, such as Mortimer Adler, and I consider how the celebrated primary teacher Vivian Gussin Paley enacts the Socratic legacy in a novel way. I argue that the misuse, or abuse, of the Socratic legacy occurs chiefly when his teaching is interpreted narrowly as a pedagogical technique devoid of context and irony.

### **Introduction**

The title of my paper is a deliberate play upon Friedrich Nietzsche's well-known essay, *The Use and Abuse of History* (1874, 1979). In that work, Nietzsche turned his eye upon his culture to decry what he termed its "malignant historical fever" (p. 4). He believed that a mere studying of the past, particularly by self-absorbed scholars, was not a vital use of historical tradition. Rather, knowledge of the past must instead serve both the present and future (p. 22), and not become merely an abstract item devoid of the context that initially gave it life (pp. 11-12).

Today, such a figure from the past serves as an important model and inspiration for much current pedagogy. The Greek philosopher Socrates is used as an example of the master teacher in many contexts, from philosophy classes to law school. There is effort underway to incorporate "Socratic" dialogue into many programs at the precollegiate level (Lipman et. al., 1980; Obermiller, 1989). On the surface, then, it would seem that this particular bit of history, brought to life for us through Plato, Xenophon, and Aristophanes, is also alive in teaching and learning, beyond the careful scholarship of the university classicist or philosopher.

This diversity in the use of the legacy of Socrates in current pedagogy does signify a vital tradition. Many of the uses of this legacy are admirable. Yet, understandings of a

"Socratic method" differ widely. There is, for example, disagreement over whether Socrates offered a pedagogical method as that term is understood today. I propose to examine a number of uses of Socratic pedagogy in different contexts in order to show inconsistency among them, particularly in reference to the Platonic Socrates. I build upon other recent work (Haroutunian-Gordon, 1991; Burbules, 1993; Pekarsky, 1994) that explore the Socratic legacy for education, while offering insights into additional recent Socratic practitioners (Paley, 1986, 1990; Adler, 1982, 1990; Weiss, 1987).

I conclude that there is widespread use of the term "Socratic" in descriptions of certain types of teaching. Yet, when Socratic teaching is taken to mean everything from dialectical examination of philosophical issues of justice, the good, and the like, (Gray, 1988) to the use of questions by a teacher, independent of the subject matter (Kay and Young, 1986), there needs to be a clearer understanding of the uses of the Socratic legacy for teaching.

### **Background: Some Recent Commentators on Socrates**

Several current critical views of Socrates should be taken into account if we are to fully understand and be able to appraise critically that legacy. Moreover, such criticism is a key element in a determination of the uses of Socrates for present day teaching, as I shall argue at the end of this paper. Recent commentators on both the historical and Platonic Socrates, among them Bruce Kimball (1986), I. F. Stone (1988), and Friedrich Nietzsche (1872, 1956), have been critical of Socrates and his legacy. Stone sees a Socrates as the enemy of the nascent Greek democracy, Nietzsche portrays a degenerate destroyer of the heroic legacy of the tragic age of Greece, and Kimball rues the emphasis of Socratic rationality over Ciceronian oratory in liberal education.

Nietzsche, though of at least two minds about Socrates (Dannhauser, 1974, especially pp. 269f.), began his career with a full-force attack upon the Greek. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872, 1956), he laments the emergence of the Socratic spirit of exhaustive analysis that put an end to the Apollinian-Dionysian mix that spawned early Greek tragedy. Nietzsche notes that Socrates was incapable of appreciating the earlier tragedians, like Aeschylus, and only attended the plays of Euripides (whom Nietzsche sneeringly calls the first rational tragedian (pp. 81-83)). Socrates's insistence upon painstaking analysis signaled for Nietzsche not only the end of the vitality of Greek culture, but also the beginning of an age of men with diminished spirits dependent upon rational analysis rather than creative myth.

An even more blistering attack, though from a different angle, comes from the late journalist I. F. Stone (1988). Stone sees Socrates as democracy's enemy, one who believed that the herd of men needed to be firmly ruled (p. 38). This political view, coupled with the belief that knowledge is absolute and unattainable, and that virtue and knowledge could not be taught (pp. 63f.), makes it difficult for Stone to see how Socrates could be defended as a teacher or even citizen of Athens. Stone's book made a splash in the trade press because he attempted to defend Athenian democracy against Socrates.

A more measured critique of Socrates's influence can be found in Bruce Kimball's widely discussed book, *Orators and Philosophers* (1986). Kimball points out that the philosophical tradition of Socrates has won out in contemporary liberal education over the oratorical tradition of Cicero. Kimball sees a tension between the pursuit of knowledge on the one hand, and the recognition and maintenance of the importance of historical traditions within learning communities on the other hand.

Kimball's discussion has crucial educational import. It challenges us to find ways to keep alive the Socratic spirit, however corrosive or parasitic of myth and culture, while also maintaining an appreciation and a cultivation of tradition and custom advocated in the

Ciceronian oratorical view. This challenge was of course Nietzsche's own too, made clear in *The Use and Abuse of History*. We shall keep this theme from Kimball and Nietzsche in mind as we examine contemporary Socratic pedagogy.

Such views were not voiced specifically apropos of educational practice; yet they are key to understanding Socratic pedagogy today. This import is evident in a heated published exchange between Richard Paul and Louis Goldman concerning the role of Socratic inquiry in the schools (Goldman, 1984; Paul, 1984). Goldman believes that Socratic questioning can be dangerous if begun too early: "A proper education of the young must begin with a firm grounding in the nature and values of our culture" (Goldman, 1984, p. 60; see also Nietzsche 1872, 1956; Beatty, 1984; Kimball, 1986). He notes that Plato advocated dialectics only after a long preparatory education. Socratic questioning can become dynamite in the wrong hands, and we only approximate his practice (p. 62). Goldman recommends that we attend to traditional (Ciceronian, in Kimball's term) education for the young, and not encourage too early an introduction to dialectics.

Richard Paul, perhaps the most well known advocate of critical thinking in the schools, disagrees with Goldman. He believes that we must foster the habit of thinking critically at the same time and in tandem with an appreciation of culture. He takes up the challenge offered by Kimball and others. To borrow Kimball's terms, Paul believes that a synthesis of Socratic inquiry and Ciceronian traditionalism should be fostered. Paul goes further by making a claim common to theorists interested in philosophy for the young (Matthews, 1980; Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 1980). Thinking philosophically occurs naturally in children. Infectious curiosity manifested in childlike wonder and the persistent questioning that attends such wonder should be harnessed by a sensitive teacher to further the appreciation of cultural traditions and other educational aims.

### **Socrates as Teacher: A Reexamination**

Prominent philosophers of education extend these perspectives, from Nietzsche to current debates in the area of critical thinking. Perhaps the most sustained attempt to grapple with the legacy of Socrates for pedagogy has been made by Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon and her colleagues (Hansen 1988; Haroutunian-Gordon 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991; Haroutunian and Jackson 1986).

Through a close reading of several of the Socratic dialogues, particularly the *Gorgias*, *Meno*, *Philebus*, *Phaedo*, and *Protagoras*, Haroutunian-Gordon challenges the notion of a "Socratic method." For instance, she points out Socratic inconsistencies that call into question use of the term. She makes a further claim that the reason Socrates does not follow a prescribed formal method is that he is in what educational researchers now call an "ill-structured teaching situation." Following a predetermined dialectical blueprint will not suffice for the way that a discussion may have gone "awry" (Haroutunian-Gordon, 1988, p. 231). In such situations, the questions one asks depend on the content of the conversation, and how nuance and shadings of meaning issue forth their own structure. Certainly many post-Wittgensteinian philosophers, as diverse as Grice and Gadamer, have explored this phenomenon long known to writers of imaginative literature. For our purposes, so too have experienced teachers known how to work their way out of ill-structured situations to effect learning for diverse students.

Elsewhere, by way of showing again the inadequacy of a formal description of Socrates's teaching, Haroutunian-Gordon attempts to "identify pedagogical aims" (1987, pp. 119f.) by giving four suggestions about what these might be: 1) bring interlocutors to *aporia*; 2) pursue truth about fundamental questions; 3) teach proper intellectual habits; 4) modify the moral principles of the interlocutors. Though Socrates may advocate the philosophical life via these aims according to Haroutunian-Gordon, he does not demand that

others follow this life, nor are these purported aims necessarily relevant to the "task of explaining why he did what he did in the dialogues" (1987, p. 129). Haroutunian-Gordon's arguments are important, for they powerfully undermine an easy mimicry of the use of Plato's Socrates in one's pedagogy.

### **Socratic Pedagogy in the Meno**

The Socratic legacy offered up by Haroutunian-Gordon and her colleagues, along with the views discussed by recent commentators, make it difficult to see how Socrates has become such a pervasive pedagogical model. He says repeatedly that he is not a teacher, and then seems almost intent on proving that claim by irony, inconsistent action, and an occasional long-winded speech, as at the end of the *Gorgias*. Yet, perhaps we can turn to one place where many have looked when they speak of Socratic teaching, Plato's dialogue *Meno*. An old man drawing geometric figures in the sand for a young slave boy is a powerful image of what many believe Socratic teaching to be.

Nevertheless, we must be careful with this seemingly transparent instance of pedagogy. Though an important theme of the dialogue comes when Socrates extracts the distinction between knowledge and true opinion through coaxing and vivid imagery, his supposed drawing out of the recollected geometric wisdom from the slave boy is troublesome as a display of pedagogy.

Socrates begins his lesson by putting words in the mouth of the slave boy (82B f.). Is this a convincing display of pedagogy? Leaving aside the blatant (to my eyes at least) problems of power and dominance of an elderly Greek citizen teaching a slave boy, this example of teaching has always left me cold. It is not apparent at all that teaching has occurred though it is a convincing display of inference as R. E. Allen (1959) has pointed out. It is not made clear in the dialogue that the slave boy is somehow capable of using his knowledge. He appears more like a sounding board for Socrates, who here seems to be just a mouthpiece for the theories of recollection (anamnesis) and innate knowledge.

I grant that a more generous reading of the *Meno* that sets aside this power differential is possible (Macmillan and Garrison, 1988; Burbules, 1993, pp. 120-122). Here Socrates is actually teaching when he asks his leading questions of the slave boy, because these questions are disguised answers to the questions that the boy should be asking. These questions are "stepwise" (Burbules, 1993, p. 122) in an instructional kind of dialogue where the end is known by the teacher, and implicitly known by the slave boy (Macmillan and Garrison, 1988, p. 154).

### **Contemporary Inspiration: Capturing, and Missing, the Socratic Spirit**

Though the *Meno* may be troublesome to some as pedagogy, it has provided inspiration to classroom teachers. The famous passage (80A-B) where Meno chides Socrates for being like the electric ray (or torpedo) for delivering perplexing questions has provided Donald Thomas (1985) with a way to teach so that students will go out on their own and dig under the surface. In a brief and thoughtful essay, Thomas describes an episode in his early secondary school teaching career when he dramatically presented a sermon by the Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards for his students. He wanted to stun his students into a perplexity that might be uncomfortable, much as Socrates makes Meno uncomfortable with his persistent questions. Thomas wanted them to see Edwards come alive so that these contemporary students would not forget the Puritan's images. The "torpedo's touch" was there, much to the chagrin of a team of behaviorally oriented evaluators in the back of the room.

Many years after this incident, Thomas still uses the "torpedo's touch" in his pedagogical array. Like Socrates, he often begins with pleasantries and surface talk, waiting for the right moment to deliver the stark and perplexing questions that may provoke wonder coupled with a realization of ignorance in his students (p. 222). Yet, Thomas's essay is too brief for him to give us examples of his questions, and to recreate a number of different pedagogical scenarios. Furthermore, we would want to know just how his questions were akin to those of Socrates beyond being perplexing and intellectually numbing.

While Thomas has taken inspiration from Socrates in his classroom practice, others attempt to devise Socratic teaching strategies devoid of such spirit. Some of the most flagrant "abuses" associated with using Socrates as a pedagogic model come when superficial aspects of the Platonic Socrates are used uncritically as pedagogic strategies.

Fishman (1985) notes several of these "misconceptions." The Socratic method is often seen and used today as an open-ended question and answer process (p. 185). Kay and Young (1986) equate Socratic teaching with asking more questions in the classroom and with the encouragement of students to become independent and autonomous thinkers. They compare Socratic questioning with a teaching strategy called "ReQuest," developed by the educationist Anthony Manzo. No mention of content or aim of the questions is given by Kay and Young; apparently to them it seems sufficient that the teacher is a full-time questioner in order to be dubbed Socratic.

### **Beyond Inspiration: Current Socratic Teaching**

In what follows, I explore a number of examples of Socratic teaching strategies that have gone beyond either drawing inspiration from the dialogues or missing that inspiration. A weakness in Thomas's approach is that a pedagogical strategy, rich with examples, is not spelled out in his brief essay. On the other hand, if an understanding of the Socratic mission is absent, we may be led to the lifting and distorting of formal qualities of Socratic practice in our teaching, as with Kay and Young (1986). The teaching of Vivian Gussin Paley and another Chicago based Socratic practitioner, Mortimer Adler, provide our next examples as we enrich our horizon concerning Socratic pedagogy.

Vivian Paley, recently retired from years of teaching kindergarten, tells us of numbness of a different kind from that of Thomas's "torpedo's touch." She describes candidly her lack of interest and enjoyment in her early years of teaching (1986). She happened to observe a colleague using the "old Socratic method" (p. 123) she too had once used as a Great Books discussion leader. Then she began to realize how excited she was about the process of thinking going on in the minds of her students. She now affirms the place of this process over any other outcome, or product, in her teaching (1990). Children are not interested in answers, she claims, but are fascinated by process (1990; see also Matthews, 1980) and entranced by meaning making and the play of language.

The impetus for renewed interest and curiosity about her own teaching came from the hard realization that she did not know the answers to the questions that her young charges were posing. Paley was thus forced to keep asking relevant questions, based not on her own preconceptions, but rather on how the child was thinking about a topic (1986, p. 124). The classroom drama, in which her students enacted imaginative stories of their own construction, became for her "a paper chain of magical imaginings mixed with some solid facts" (1986, p. 123). This paper chain offered Paley abundant opportunities for her version of Socratic probing.

Yet Paley the teacher goes beyond Socratic questioning in the classroom. She turns the questioning reflexively upon herself and her own thinking with a "specific tool" (1990) she has used for years, the tape recorder. Paley tapes daily ninety minutes of her students'

stories and the accompanying dialogue. The tape recorder, with its "unrelenting fidelity" (1986, p. 123) trained her to listen precisely to what the children say. In transcribing the taped dialogue, large chunks of which appear in her books, Paley has the opportunity to review all that went on in the classroom. Using what she calls an "internalized Socratic method" (Obermiller, 1986, p. 19), she takes herself to task in preparation for her writing, asking herself questions like "why did I ignore that question?" or "is that something I could have taken up with him?" (1990).

For Paley, this activity is part of the "intellectual game of teaching" (1990). Interacting with preschoolers as they play with blocks is not merely play, but also the process of thinking and intellectual inquiry. Her exhausting teaching, taping, and transcribing regimen is an important living manifestation of the Socratic notion of the worth of the examined life. This element of reflexive inquiry aimed at self-knowledge, difficult to achieve, is absent from such purported Socratic teaching advocated by practitioners like Kay and Young.

Paley's methods have attracted attention and acclaim. Yet Mortimer Adler and his supporters espouse an even more widespread version of Socratic teaching. Adler's Paideia Proposal (1982) is one of the key documents of the recent school reform movement. In this brief work he advocates three interrelated ways of learning (p. 23) that should be followed by all students regardless of age or ability: 1) the acquisition of knowledge by lectures, memorization, and other means; 2) the development of intellectual skills, through coaching; 3) the enlargement of understanding through Socratic discussion of ideas and texts. However, the overwhelming majority of the focus given in the implementation of the Paideia Proposal, has been on the third type of learning, the Socratic seminar (Gray, 1988, Sizer, 1984, Chapter 5). Let us turn to a discussion of Adler's version of Socratic pedagogy.

Adler's description of seminar pedagogy is deceptively simple: A "discussion in which students both ask and answer questions" (1982, p. 53). One of his close associates, Patricia Weiss, defines a seminar as: "(an) educationally oriented discussion in which ideas, issues, or principles are examined...The main teaching method used in seminars is one of questioning and examining responses. This style of teaching is often referred to as Socratic teaching, named after Socrates who used questions in his teaching of the youth of Athens in 400 BC" (1987, p. 1; emphasis added).

Weiss then describes the three tasks of the seminar leader proposed by Adler: " 1) to ask a series of questions, 2) to examine the answers by trying to draw out the reasons for them, or their implications, 3) to engage the participants in a two-way talk with one another when views appear to be in conflict" (p. 1). I can recognize Socrates in 1 and 2, though I cannot recall anywhere in the dialogues where Socrates encourages his interlocutors to debate each other. Rather, with few exceptions (Callicles comes to mind), these interlocutors are more likely to give monosyllabic replies to Socrates's withering questions, prompting more than one reader to wonder just how dialogic these accounts were intended to be.

One the other hand, though this Adlerian technique may not be true to the Platonic Socrates, might it be seen as a commendable development of Socratic practice? After all it does seem odd (unless you consider Plato's own agenda for his created characters) that these interlocutors, many of whom are absurdly laconic, rarely argue amongst themselves (the Gorgias being a striking exception). Sadly, though, at least in my repeated observation of seminars led by Adler himself and some of his associates, this third task of a seminar leader is as rarely practiced today as it might have been in ancient Athens.

Let us now turn to a closer examination of how Weiss practices Socratic teaching. In her manual that accompanies the videotapes of Adler leading seminars for high school students (1987), Weiss provides a detailed discussion of how to structure a seminar. She

suggests that the teacher first set an atmosphere that will allow students to feel at ease in asking questions. This may include putting to one side any expertises students may bring to the text at hand (Gray, 1988) so that general discussion among (near) equals may be established. Weiss begins her classes with a variety of nonthreatening questioning techniques (e.g., round robin, voting, random call on whether students like or dislike Socrates are typical in her teaching of the Apology) to get discussion going.

Once discussion is underway, Weiss may move to ask whether Socrates is a teacher, opinions on the charges made against him in the Apology, or whether he is guilty or innocent. Like Haroutunian-Gordon (1988), Weiss acknowledges the "ill-structured teaching situation" through this emphasis upon making teachers aware of the importance of being prepared to ask unscripted follow-up questions (Weiss, 1987, p. 2). These practices are all commendable, but they rest upon a crucial assumption, made clear by another Paideia advocate, Dennis Gray. Even as Gray asserts that Socrates had no syllabus, he declares that the purpose of Socratic teaching is to focus always on texts, with even the opening question based upon a close study of the text at hand (1988).

The changes we moderns have made in the name of Socrates could not be clearer. Socrates, of course, did not use a common reading around a seminar table. Furthermore, this assertion by Gray makes apparent another related assumption of the Paideia method, namely that great works will contain great ideas.

### **The Dark Side of the Socratic Legend**

The image of Socratic teaching presented above has been mixed. Socrates can be difficult and disarming. Yet we educators are often intent upon seeing Socrates in the warm glow of history as the one who began humanistic inquiry. In this section, I shall return to an unromantic view of Socrates that I have so far only presented through other writers such as Stone and Nietzsche.

I shall suggest the importance, though with qualifications, of the dark side of the Socratic spirit by turning to some first-hand accounts of legal pedagogy, and the use of the "Socratic method" in law schools. In spite of Adler's inroads into the nation's schools, the popular image of Socratic teaching often comes from the so-called "Socratic method" used in law schools. I gleaned insight from colleagues from graduate school who hold the doctoral degree in philosophy and have also studied law.

Many of us have never entered a law class, but we feel that we know what goes on there. We have seen John Houseman's portrayal of Professor Kingsfield in the film and television show, "The Paper Chase." Houseman's depiction of an unforgiving taskmaster asking his often-timid students withering questions is the beginning and the end of legal pedagogy for most of us, and for our perceptions on how Socrates is used in legal teaching. In consulting two colleagues who have experienced legal pedagogy, I was able to deepen my understanding of Socratic legal teaching beyond this popular image.

Peter Suber, professor of philosophy at Earlham College, holds both the PhD and JD degrees from Northwestern University. His description of a law class is truly harrowing: "Incorrect answers, undue delays in answering, or overt signs of nervousness are punished with sardonic jibes or withering glances. The atmosphere is humiliation; the punishment is humiliation...The consensus among students is that the method is not 'educational' in any traditional sense. It does not help one learn cases or legal reasoning. It is sadistic" (1990). Suber sees ample evidence in the dialogues to think that Socrates behaved similarly. Furthermore, Suber believes that the so-called legal Socratic method is used in different ways in law schools of different levels of prestige (1990). In the most prestigious category, students behave in the "Paper Chase" fashion, reciting the facts and attendant arguments while standing and attempting to answer the professor's questions.

On the other hand, Suber notes what he calls second echelon schools and below may be places where the method is more humane. Here there may be more emphasis upon reasoning and thinking rather than performance. Unlike the first instance cited, this gentler use of the method may in fact emphasize "respond(ing) to well-crafted counterfactuals again and again" (1990) in an atmosphere of support and trust.

Another former colleague, Mark Olson, also holds the doctoral degree in philosophy from Northwestern University and a law degree from the University of California at Berkeley. Olson, now a practicing attorney, takes a different tack in discussing his experience. He begins by offering a definition of what he carefully calls the "legal Socratic method: "(It) employs the use of actual recorded court cases to teach students the rules of law and their application and justification (whether clear or not, whether persuasive or not), through the instructor's use of a series of hypotheticals based on the main case and through the students' discussion of the case and the hypotheticals. Its successful use and reception calls for skill and wit" (1990).

Olson reminds us of other factors that I agree are crucial to the understanding of the legacy of Socrates for pedagogy. The Socratic method evolved in law training as a "historical formation, which, in its present form presupposed the existence of a legal casebook" (1990). Above all for Olson, the method is not a technique; when it is so practiced it is characteristic of inept instructors. In those classes students are not probed, but are allowed to give "unreflective (knee-jerk) responses to complex social issues" (1990).

One of my deep seated and cherished beliefs has again been questioned by this knowledge. I want to believe, along with Adler and other sanguine educators, that Socratic teaching is a means to search for truth. I still muse in uncritical moments about a Socrates, beneficent and maligned, leading the youth of Athens on the golden path of instruction. Even in graduate programs in philosophy one does not discuss often the darker side of this practice as argued by Stone and Nietzsche, and brought to the fore here in a different way by Suber and Olson. Stone's criticism of Socrates is too recent; besides, he built his reputation as the consummate outsider journalist who only taught himself Greek in his waning years. He did not belong to the anointed academic club of classical scholarship. Nietzsche, though a classical scholar, is often dismissed as a German at best and a raving crank at worst, particularly when it comes to his views on Socrates.

Yet, this "darker" side of Socrates must be preserved, as I shall contend in the following section, if we are to truly "use" and not "abuse" Socrates in present day teaching. Suber's description of a harrowing law class may be an extreme version of such practice, though a recent feminist critique of legal education supports Suber's claims. Guinier, Fine, and Balin (1997) go even further to call the legal Socratic method "ritualized combat" that is harmful and counterproductive to the education and well-being of women law students.

Suber's description of the "sadistic" querying that may go on in higher echelon law schools may be true to Socrates in one sense; he was relentless and oftentimes unpleasant. But we must ask to what end these displays are headed. In the following section, I shall seek to show that we must preserve the wily, irascible Socrates most of us have come to love (or hate) so that at the same time we preserve the core of his mission.

## **Conclusion: Determining the Use and Abuse of Socrates**

We have seen how Socrates is part of many classroom situations, from Paley's kindergarten on up to law school. Which of these are legitimate uses of Socrates and which are abusive? To determine such appraisals, I believe we must use several standards. Abuse of Socrates does not necessarily come, as might be first thought, when the Socratic "victim" is mischievously questioned and pierced with sardonic barbs. Abuse may come rather more



from well-meaning educators who, perhaps in the joy of discovering a technique that is liberating and aims toward thinking, strip Socrates of his power. How could the Socratic legacy be so diminished?

First, we may forget that Socrates at his best was attempting to uncover self-knowledge and encouraging others to do so too.. He followed his daemon and eschewed followers. As both Stone and Suber underscore, Socrates was devious and crafty. These factors must lie at the core of any interpretation of Socrates for present day teaching. If we apply (and I use this term deliberately) a Socratic method to any topic, this strategy does not necessarily guarantee that self-knowledge will occur. Self-knowledge is a difficult concept, as the irony used by a Socrates or a Soren Kierkegaard seems to suggest. Yet to forget the unsavory aspects of Socrates is to forsake the Socratic spirit, and thus to abuse the legacy of Socrates for education.

A related abuse of Socrates in present day teaching comes when we believe uncritically that Socrates himself was a teacher. The word teacher makes most of us who are in the "education business" think of someone who may devise and implement a curricular rationale. If Socrates was indeed a teacher, then he must have had a specific pedagogy and a specific set of topics that can be learned by others, the reasoning goes. A central insight of Burbules's recent book on dialogical teaching (1993) is in seeing clearly Socratic teaching as a multifarious repertoire. Burbules argues that Socratically inspired teachers play a dialogical "game" that, though guided by rules, is sensitive to context. Plato's own writing of the dialogue is itself a Socratic teaching act. The writer is the teacher, and the reader, the student, both of the dialogue, and, reflexively, of him or herself. But this has not deterred other educators from advocating what they suppose are simple teachable strategies and curricular objectives derived from Plato's character.

While I have observed Mortimer Adler using irony and even humiliation in a manner akin to Socrates, it is not clear that those trained by him have the confidence or the temperament to use these ploys. I have watched well-intentioned teachers trained under Adler leading supposedly "Socratic" discussions without suggesting even a hint of irony or challenge, something Adler himself criticizes as "watered-down" seminars (Adler, 1990). Perhaps a good number of teachers find themselves incapable of being "mischievous, disingenuous, and cunning, and occasionally even devious" (Suber, 1990) in the way that Plato's Socrates was.

Conflicts between Socratic teaching and other aims of education are also apparent and disturbing. Educators are urged to be supportive, to nurture their students, many of whom are currently "at-risk." Teachers must often serve as surrogate parents to students from dysfunctional families. I have taught Plato's Socrates to a number of graduate students in special education. They have all told me that using Socratic dialogue moves in their teaching would be highly problematic if not impossible. It is thus difficult and perhaps even at cross-purposes to use such a pedagogical method and encourage the cultivation of self-knowledge with these students.

Here is where the sensitivity, knowledge, and skill of a teacher, well-versed in a Socratically inspired repertoire of pedagogical strategies and moves in the dialogue game (Burbules, 1993), comes into play. In addition, such a teacher must have a sympathetic understanding of each student and the nuances of that particular classroom climate. Otherwise such abuses already discussed such as either a stripping of Socratic teaching to just a questioning exercise, on the one hand, or the "ritualized combat" experienced by many women in law classes, could occur.

My argument points to the need to recognize an enduring core of the Socratic legacy for teaching. Haroutunian-Gordon and others have given enough textual evidence in order for us to be suspicious of thinking that Socrates was a teacher in any conventional or current

sense of that term. Other commentators as diverse as Nietzsche, I.F. Stone, Bruce Kimball, and Louis Goldman have called attention to the corrosive and even dangerous qualities of Socratic inquiry. Yet why does Socrates continue to leave the torpedo's deep marks upon most anyone who reads the dialogues, and on those of us who are inspired to model his actions in our own teaching?

The Socrates of Plato's dialogues continually cuts past areas of knowledge apprehended by either episteme or phronesis, theory or practice. Socrates can make us feel that the failure to sustain a thesis or find a definition is not just a defeat of intelligence, but rather a moral disaster (Vlastos, 1971, 1980, p. 6). Socrates may not have given us a simple "method" that we can apply to any topic, and it may be difficult to teach Socratically in today's "antidialogical" schools (Burbules, 1993). Yet the larger issues raised in the dialogues must not be ignored. If anything, Socratic irony confounds many of the simplistic interpretations of the Socratic legacy for teaching. The care of the soul, the project of moral inquiry, and a searching that cuts across social class should be the first and foremost use, and ultimate worth, of Socrates for present-day teaching (Vlastos 1971, 1980; see also Gadamer, 1986; Seeskin, 1987; Johnson, 1989).

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Anthony Gordon Rud Jr. is associate dean, and associate professor of educational studies, in the School of Education at Purdue University. He received his A.B. with honors from Dartmouth College, and his M.A. and Ph.D. in philosophy from Northwestern University. Rud is a founding member and former officer of the Association for Philosophy of Education, a former member of the Committee on International Relations of the American Educational Research Association and the Committee on Pre-College Instruction of the American Philosophical Association, and a senior associate of the Council for Basic Education. He has served as a consultant for school systems on leadership issues, critical thinking, moral education, and school reform, and for organizations as diverse as the National Paideia Center at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character at Boston University, and the Department of Special Education at the University of South Florida.

Rud came to Purdue from The North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching, where he served as Senior Fellow. He also has worked at Dartmouth College as an administrator, adjunct faculty member, and freshman advisor, and taught high school humanities and social studies. Rud's research interests center upon the intersection of the foundations of education and educational practice, with particular emphasis upon the preparation and professional development of teachers and educational leaders.

Rud is senior editor and contributor to *A Place for Teacher Renewal: Challenging the Intellect, Creating Educational Reform*, published by Teachers College Press. The author of a number of articles and reviews, he regularly makes presentations at major professional conferences. Rud serves on the editorial boards of several academic and professional journals, and is the chair of the editorial board of Purdue University Press. He joins James W. Garrison as coeditor and contributor to a volume of essays entitled *The Educational Conversation: Closing the Gap*, published by the State University of New York Press in 1995.

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**Contributed Commentary on  
Volume 5 Number 20: Rud *The Use and Abuse of Socrates in Present Day Teaching***

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30 May 1998

**Rick Garlikov**

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**Preface**

I am deeply troubled by the comments about Socrates and the Socratic Method that Anthony G. Rud, Jr. makes in his "The Use and Abuse of Socrates in Present Day Teaching" (EPAA Volume 5 Number 20, November 24, 1997), because I think they reflect what many educators today might feel about Socrates as portrayed in the Platonic dialogues; and if so, I think that is a terrible loss for today's students. In this response I want to deal only with issues about the Socratic teaching method, not with the interesting, and I think false, claim Rud seems to accept (ascribing it originally to Nietzsche) about the supposed conflicts between "rationality" and "creative myth" or between the search for truth and the continuing of cultural traditions. And I do not wish to consider specific beliefs of Socrates involving possible errors in reasoning or in the factual knowledge from which he was reasoning. I wish only to examine issues relevant to instructional methodology.

What I find particularly troubling is that Rud (and, from his citations, apparently many others) doesn't see what seems to me to be quite obvious in regard to what Socrates' methodology is all about. [\(Note 1\)](#) The method of questioning of the slave boy is not unlike Socrates questioning of *Euthyphro* or of the many other, often famous and powerful, adults in the dialogues. So where Rud sees it as displaying "blatant...problems of power and dominance of an elderly Greek citizen teaching a slave boy," I see the age and class difference as irrelevant features of that dialogue, since the essential features in it are no different than in the others, where Socrates questions quite prominent and highly positioned citizens. Nor, in many cases are the questions, and the answers given by the characters in the dialogues, very different from what would occur today if one were talking to someone about those very same subjects in a modern vernacular and with references to contemporary examples of the same sorts of actions and ideas Socrates gives his examples to illustrate.

In discussing both Burbules and Haroutunian-Gordon, Rud seems to think it somehow surprising that Socrates does not follow prescribed formal methods and that he did not have a "specific pedagogy and a specific set of topics that can be learned by others." I do not know how to account for finding that surprising. It is quite clear from the dialogues that Socrates simply had thought deeply about a great many different things, and that he questioned people who expressed views he thought false about those things to see whether it was he or they who were in error, probably thinking it more likely they would be the ones who were mistaken, but entertaining the possibility he was the one who was mistaken. In the dialogues I have read, it is quite clear that Socrates' analysis is always deeper and more sustained than the other participants, and that the latter tend to express either unanalyzed,

unreflective, popular views or views for which they may have some shallow reasons, but not very good ones - certainly not ones that will withstand scrutiny. To characterize this sort of inquiry, where one responds to others' views by showing them the problems with those views, as an "ill-structured teaching situation" that teachers need "to work their way out of" is to think of teaching much too narrowly as something that can only occur with a particular topic in a particular formal and prescribed way under particular conditions regardless of what beliefs or knowledge or ability one's students bring to the classroom. And the requirement of a specific pedagogy and set of topics ignores the common notion of teaching as something, say, parents might do when they teach their kids table manners, bicycle riding, the rules of baseball, how to throw a curve ball, badminton, croquet, how to drive, checkers, card tricks, how to deal with defeat or disappointment, and a zillion other things that parents teach children without curricular rationales or systematic, formalized topics offered at specially chosen preconceived times.

The method involves teaching things at times they are relevant in ways that are most relevant to the person one is teaching, or guiding. That necessarily involves being able to ascertain what they already know or believe and understand that can help you teach them what you want them to learn. Although there will be similar elements each time you teach the same topic to different people, some quite different questions and ideas may be required as well, sometimes extremely different questions. One class I taught in the early 70's was so wedded to the principle of being true to yourself and honest with everyone else that when we discussed "When is it right to break a date, and why?" they honestly believed one should break a date, or do **anything** whenever one feels like it, regardless of what expense or effort the other person might have put into preparation for the date, and regardless of how important it might be to him or her. I thought of every possible question I could to get them to see that was not really a very good principle and that they really couldn't possibly believe it, but no matter what case I presented to them, they consistently took what seemed to me to be the most absurd and untenable position in favor of "doing whatever you really want to" even if it meant committing murder you thought you could get away with. So I had to use a very different strategy to get them to see they didn't really believe that principle was a good one to follow. That was the only group of students I ever taught who held that view; and so the way I had to deal with them during those classes was different from the way I ever had to deal with any other group. I don't consider such classes ill-structured teaching situations. I consider them to be normal teaching situations if one is really trying to address students' current knowledge, understanding, beliefs, and sincere interests as a starting place to help them learn.

And that makes reading Socratic dialogues harder than participating in one. When the interlocutor gives an answer you would not have given, immediately the dialogue will veer from the direction it would have taken had you been the one answering. You may lose interest or you may not understand or appreciate the answer; or you may not "get" the teacher's response to that answer. Yet you are not there to ask him what s/he means or why the question is relevant. Further, when you are not a participant, it may be difficult to see certain things that are important to see in order even to understand the questions. In the edition I have of the Meno, there is a diagram of the squares Socrates is discussing with the slave, but it is a finished diagram, containing all the elements Socrates draws out for the slave boy one at a time as he needs them. It is difficult to tell which lines Socrates is pointing to as he asks questions about the various squares and their areas relative to each other. So what might be quite instructive for the slave boy in Socrates' presence as he draws or points to certain lines in the figure might be more difficult for a reader to understand than would be reading a straightforward essay or argument. Unless the answers given by another student are the same as what you would have given, the reading of a Socratic dialogue



involving him or her is **not** the same educational experience as participating in such a dialogue. Even for the same topic, each occurrence of Socratic teaching is potentially quite different from another. That may explain why someone might see given dialogues as just a bunch of persistent questions that are "devious" and difficult. They may not appreciate the point or rationale for the specific questions in a specific dialogue. But since Rud is a philosopher, presumably knowledgeable about some of the topics in the dialogues, that does not explain to me **his** characterization of them that way. I would have thought he would understand why Socrates chooses the particular questions he does at the times he does.

Before getting into the method itself, I would like to dispose of two psychological characteristics Rud associates with it in some cases, that I think are also irrelevant to it: 1) ridicule of the respondent or of his answers, and 2) paralysis from fear by the respondent about having to participate in the enterprise. Ridicule can be used with almost any teaching method, even responding to raised hands, one can call on a student in a hostile and derisive manner. There is nothing about the Socratic method itself that requires hostility and sarcasm. And Socrates did not use it that way generally, if at all. To say or imply that because some people use the method "sadistically" to "humiliate" students in a form of "ritualized combat," the method has a "dark" or "unsavory" side ("to forget the unsavory aspects of Socrates is to forsake the Socratic spirit...", among other such passages) is like saying that because some people lecture in a boring manner, that lectures are by nature boring, or that because some jokes are tasteless that humor is by nature tasteless.

Further, neither the slave boy nor many of the other people Socrates questioned seemed to be numbed by fear of making some sort of mistake. Used in an engaging and kind way, there is no need for the method to be threatening. And while many students or colleagues tend to become suspicious "something is up" when someone, particularly a philosopher, launches into what seem to be Socratic types of questions, that seldom ties many tongues, unless one feels interrogated and threatened by the questioner for reasons other than his/her asking questions. Many of the characters in the dialogues do seem to find excuses to leave the discussions when they find their initial views untenable, but they don't seem hesitant to be in the discussions up to that point. For students, who are often not so wedded to a view that they find a successful challenge to it unbearable, the Socratic method is often quite exciting. My experience in using it with "at risk" or students with low GPA's and/or low self-esteem is that they find it interesting, challenging, stimulating, helpful, and nurturing. Rural Alabama students and urban inner-city students alike have said they wished their previous courses had been as thought-provoking, challenging, and attentive to their own ideas. Students often prefer to have their ideas taken seriously and disagreed with and questioned than to have them ignored or patronizingly given a good grade with no real critical or analytical attention paid to them. It is a terrible mistake to see the Socratic Method as being always and automatically antithetical to nurturing or supportive teaching. It only appears that way on the surface, or perhaps to people who don't think any ideas should be probed too deeply or their advocates challenged to justify them.

Finally in this preface, Socrates answers Rud's objection that "It is not made clear in the dialogue that the slave boy is somehow capable of using his knowledge." Socrates says what I think is true: "At present these notions have just been stirred up in him, as if in a dream; but if he were frequently asked the same questions in different forms, he would know as well as anyone at last." The way I tell this to people whom I teach photography is to say, "In two lessons [about four hours total time] I will teach you almost everything there is to know about photography so that you will understand it all. But you will not be able to apply it automatically or even keep it all in mind, for it will not have "sunk in". For that you will need to shoot pictures and bring them to me so that I can go over them and analyze them with you in light of the principles I will have taught you. That is when your understanding

will start to sink in and become automatic(ally applied)."

## The Socratic Method

The Socratic Method is simply a way, through asking certain sorts of pointed and stimulating, interesting or "live" questions, to get students, or anyone, to focus on the elements one thinks important for understanding of an idea or phenomena, in an order or perspective likely to help them gain that understanding. The idea is that by asking leading questions -- often logically leading questions-- about the elements one is bringing attention to, the other person will be able to see what you see about the idea or phenomena and will then attain the same understanding of it that you do.

The method only works with regard to logical/conceptual types of material; one does not learn "facts" via the Socratic Method, not directly anyway. (It may help the discovery of new facts by showing where one might need to "look" for phenomena, in the same way that theoretical physics often fosters discoveries in applied physics.) However, it can be used to make learning facts easier, by organizing their introduction to the student in a way likely to be more meaningful to him or her. More about this below, with regard to teaching photography.

When Socrates says it is not teaching, there are a number of things he might mean: (1) that it is not about telling anyone facts, or teaching them a skill (2) that it is not about telling anyone any thing s/he does not already know, in some sense of know, (3) that it only works with people who have some appreciation for, and sense of, inference, (4) that it is not about learning new things, but about putting into perspective things one knows but does not fully attend to or see the significance of, and/or (5) that it only applies to logical/conceptual aspects of material, not to the transfer of factual information . In the *Apology*, Socrates contrasts his kind of knowledge or wisdom with that of farmers, poets, etc. He does not have the kind of knowledge they have, which can be taught. He has a different sort of knowledge or insight. And he cannot "teach" one to have that, but he can demonstrate the results of his insight to others in certain ways, if they are willing and able to be receptive in certain ways. I consider what Socrates does to be teaching, even if he did not, because I consider methodically and intentionally fostering particular new perspectives and greater understanding in another person to be one (extremely important) form or aspect of teaching. But it is definitely not the same thing as trying to tell or teach facts or fact-based skills.

But the Method differs from just asking questions, especially open-ended or non-leading questions, or ones that one does not know the answer to oneself. That is in part why it is a teaching method, not just a brain-storming activity nor an activity whose point is merely to inspire thought or research by simply asking general or open-ended questions or questions one does not know the answer to oneself. Bill Hunter and I had a long e-mail debate, which is available in an edited form at <http://www.Garlikov.com/teaching/dialogue.html> about whether fostering research or discovery by students, via questions the questioner may not know the answer to, is teaching.

I use the Socratic Method for teaching many things. For a transcript of a fairly "pure" (i.e., questions only) use of the method, with commentary about it, for teaching a logical/conceptual idea see my "The Socratic Method: Teaching by Asking Instead of by Telling", [http://www.Garlikov.com/Soc\\_Meth.html](http://www.Garlikov.com/Soc_Meth.html), But I also use the method for organizing material when I teach, say, photography; and for getting students to see mistakes in their reasoning in any subject matter area. An example of the latter case was in a discussion of homosexuality in an "Ethics and Society" course where many students said that homosexuality was wrong because (the idea of) it was so disgusting. I asked them whether they thought that such disgust was a sufficient characteristic to make an action be immoral. They said it was. I asked them then to close their eyes and think about ... their

parents having sex with each other. They all let out an even bigger groan of disgust, and said they found that idea really disgusting. So I asked whether they would have to conclude then that it was immoral for their parents ever to have (or to have had) sex with each other. They agreed it was not. Of course they then asked whether that meant I thought homosexuality was moral. My response was that whether it is or is not is simply unrelated to whether it is personally disgusting or not to anyone. I was not trying to argue in this particular case for or against the morality of homosexuality, but was merely trying to get them to see that finding an action disgusting did not justify their thinking it must be immoral just because of that. Having introduced the point to them in that dramatic ("Torpedo's touch"?) way, we then go on to talk about other activities that they might sometimes characterize as disgusting but not immoral - such as dietary preferences that may be quite different from one's own, surgical procedures, etc.-- so that that one example is not seen to be either an anomaly or a complete explanation.

As to helping present facts in a manner conducive to seeing their significance, when I teach photography, I give certain demonstrations and then ask leading questions about them. Most people, even a great many who have taken a photography course or two, do not understand very well the significance of shutter speeds, aperture settings, or film ISO numbers. And they do not see that all these are related to each other in a simple way, nor what that portends for their picture-taking. So I open the back of an empty camera, remove the lens cap, and point the camera toward a light surface and trip the shutter, first at different shutter speeds, and then after some questions, at different aperture settings, letting them see what happens. After the shutter speed demonstration I ask them which shutter speeds let in more light, the ones where the shutter is open longer or shorter. They pretty clearly see that the longer the shutter is open, the more light comes in from a given source. After I point out that the shutter speed numbers are actually just reciprocals of time measured in seconds (e.g., 250 stands for 1/250 second, 2 stands for 1/2 second, etc.) I then ask how much more or less light is let in between each shutter speed on the dial. Except for one place where an insignificantly slight adjustment is made in the system, because the time increments between shutter speeds are doubled (or halved in the other direction), they immediately see that changing shutter speeds doubles or halves the amount of light let onto the film by a given source, all other things being equal. Letting light from a source go through an opening for one second, for example, allows twice as much light to come in as does allowing it to go through for half a second.

I then go through the same thing with regard to aperture setting. "Which lets in more light?" Obviously the larger opening will. Then I simply tell them that the aperture system is designed in such a way that the difference between adjacent apertures also lets in twice or half as much light, depending on the direction one is going. Then I ask them how much different the amount of light let in is if I were to increase the shutter speed by one click, and also increase the size of the aperture by one click. They see that is the same amount of light. I do it again, and again. All the changes make no change in the amount of light let in to the film. It does not take them long to ask their own question, which is some variation on "Then how do you choose which combination to use, if they all do the same thing?" I take that question to be one sign they are understanding what I have been teaching them so far. And that question allows me to go into the properties shutter speeds and apertures control in addition to **amount** of light.

Now one of the, I think unjustified, criticisms of the Socratic Method is that the questions are not so much logically leading in a way to give insight as they are psychologically merely prompting questions whose answers are obvious from verbal or psychological cues rather than from attention to the content. This may be what Rud means when he says that Socrates begins by putting words in the mouth of the slave. I can discuss

this criticism better with an example of my own from a criticism of my Socratic Method paper. There is a place in that paper where I report asking a group of third grade students how many **numerals** there are in our (Arabic, decimal) numbering system. At first the answer the class shouts out is "nine"; then someone says "ten" and there is some agreement with that. So I asked "Which is it, nine or ten," and they all yelled back "Ten!" I took that, whether mistakenly or not, as a sign that they were now including zero as a numeral that they had initially neglected to consider when they said "nine." My next question was "If we list the numerals in order, starting with zero, what will the list be?" I was taken to task by a critic of the method for essentially telling the students zero was a numeral. I don't think I did, because I was pretty certain their change from nine to ten implied they realized zero was a numeral to consider, but I can see how someone might think so. However, it is really an irrelevant criticism of the method, though it may be a justified criticism of this particular application of the method. Had I been more precise or more thorough, or had I thought it necessary, I would have asked something like "Why did you change from 'nine' to 'ten'?" or "What are the ten numerals?" If zero were still missing, I could have asked something that would have got them to realize it, by, say, holding up a closed fist and asking how many fingers I was 'holding up'. When they said "none," I could have asked how they might write "none" numerically. Or if I asked them what the lowest numeral was and they had said "One," I could have asked them whether there was not some number lower than one. I assume that somehow or other we could have easily got to zero, and to their recalling and recognizing it was the lowest numeral. At that point the class would have continued as it then did in the original.

As to the answers to the individual questions in a Socratic dialogue being prompted by cues other than logic, there are four responses I would make to dispute that. 1) You cannot get satisfactory answers to the later questions without first having gone through the earlier questions, so at least these later questions by themselves obviously do not contain the clues for answering them. 2) There are people who "get lost" and cannot answer the middle to later questions in a chain of questions that develops a line of reasoning. They cannot make connections as they go along. They report that they cannot "follow" the line of thought being developed. 3) When people do successfully follow a chain of questions, they usually report that suddenly they "see" how all this [whatever is being explained or taught] works. They display a "Eureka" experience that cannot be accounted for by their having answered easy individual questions whose answers were obvious by the way the questions were asked. And 4) one can often see students make insightful comments or ask penetrating questions that show they are starting to catch on to things greater or more encompassing than your individual questions have covered - comments and questions they could not make or ask at the beginning of the chain of questions.

## **Rick Garlikov**

### **Notes**

1. Rud at one point talks about Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon's operating from a "close" reading of the dialogues, and some of the comments he makes, especially about the geometric derivation Socrates goes through with the slave boy, indicate he and other critics may not be operating from that kind of reading. I would have thought any analysis would necessitate operating from a "close" reading, but perhaps that is neither required nor expected in "citation-based" or "reference-based" scholarship or analysis based on deconstruction. When Rud says, for example, "...Socrates makes Meno uncomfortable with

his persistent questions" that strikes me as an odd description of the origin of discomfort of the participants in the dialogues. It is not that Socrates has persistent questions as a three-year-old might or as a heckler at a political rally might; and it is not that his questions are difficult or embarrassing. The crux of the discomfort in many of the dialogues is that Socrates' specific questions lead logically and, in a sense forcefully, to ideas the participants cannot, or do not want to have to, entertain or accept. And when Rud says things like "Socrates was devious and crafty" or that Socratically inspired teachers are good at playing some sort of "dialogue game," it seems to miss the point in the same way it would miss the point to analyze Einstein's work by saying only that Einstein was intelligent but unusual in his thinking, and that his theories are quite strange. Furthermore, since "devious" and "crafty" imply gamesmanship or trickery of some sort, their use paints a picture quite different from the picture I see of Socrates as I read the dialogues. I see the Socrates of the *Euthyphro*, *Meno*, *Republic*, *Apology*, and other dialogues I have read as insightful, brilliant, understanding, sincere, honest, and passionately opposed to loose and fallacious thinking. But I only came to see him that way after teaching modern versions of the same topics, and seeing that the views contemporary students and adults hold about those topics are not very different from the views portrayed by the Platonic participants, and that the same objections or arguments Socrates used, apply as well.