Against Persuasion

Knowing takes radical collaboration: an openness to being persuaded as much as an eagerness to persuade.

Agnes Callard

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Philosophers aren't the only ones who love wisdom. Everyone, philosopher or not, loves her own wisdom: the wisdom she has or takes herself to have. What distinguishes the philosopher is loving the wisdom she doesn't have. Philosophy is, therefore, a form of humility: being aware that you lack what is of supreme importance. There may be no human being who exemplified this form of humility more perfectly than Socrates. It is no coincidence that he is considered the first philosopher within the Western canon.

Socrates did not *write* philosophy; he simply went around talking to people. But these conversations were so transformative that Plato devoted his life to writing dialogues that represent Socrates in conversation. These dialogues are not transcripts of actual conversations, but they are nonetheless clearly intended to reflect not only Socrates's ideas but his personality. Plato wanted the world to remember Socrates. Generations after Socrates's death, warring philosophical schools such as the Stoics and the Skeptics each appropriated Socrates as figurehead. Though they disagreed on just about every point of doctrine, they were clear that in order to count themselves as philosophers they had to somehow be working in the tradition of Socrates.

What is it about Socrates that made him into a symbol for the whole institution of philosophy? Consider the fact that, when the Oracle at Delphi proclaims Socrates wisest of men, he tries to prove it wrong. As Plato recounts it in the *Apology*:

> I went to one of those reputed wise, thinking that there, if anywhere, I could refute the oracle and say to it: "This man is wiser than I, but you said I was." Then, when I examined this man—there is no need for me to tell you his name, he was one of our public men—my experience was something like this: I thought that he appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not. I then tried to show him that he thought himself wise, but that he was not. As a result he came to dislike me, and so did many of the bystanders. So I withdrew and thought to myself: "I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know."

If Socrates's trademark claim is this protestation of ignorance, his trademark activity is the one also described in this passage: refuting the views of others. These are the conversations we find in Plato's texts. How are the claim and the activity related? Socrates denies that his motivations are altruistic: he says he is not a teacher, and insists that he is himself the primary beneficiary of the conversations he initiates. This adds to the mystery: What is Socrates getting out of showing people that they don't know what they take themselves to know? What's his angle?

Over and over again, Socrates approaches people who are remarkable for their lack of humility—which is to say, for the fact that they feel confident in their own knowledge of what is just, or pious, or brave, or moderate. You might have supposed that

Socrates, whose claim to fame is his awareness of his own ignorance, would treat these self-proclaimed "wise men" (Sophists) with contempt, hostility, or indifference. But he doesn't. The most remarkable feature of Socrates's approach is his punctilious politeness and sincere enthusiasm. The conversation usually begins with Socrates asking his interlocutor: Since you think you know, can you tell me, what is courage (or wisdom, or piety, or justice . . .)? Over and over again, it turns out that they think they can answer, but they can't. Socrates's hope springs eternal: even as he walks toward the courtroom to be tried—and eventually put to death—for his philosophical activity, he is delighted to encounter the self-important priest Euthyphro, who will, surely, be able to say what piety is. (Spoiler: he's not.)

What is Socrates getting out of showing people that they don't know what they take themselves to know?

Socrates seemed to think that the people around him could help him acquire the knowledge he so desperately wanted—even though they were handicapped by the illusion that they already knew it. Indeed, I believe that their ill-grounded confidence was precisely what drew Socrates to them. If you think you know something, you will be ready to speak on the topic in question. You will hold forth, spout theories, make claims—and all this, under Socrates's relentless questioning, is the way to actually acquire the knowledge you had deluded yourself into thinking you already had.

Let me sketch a little dialogue you might have with Socrates.

> **Socrates**: What is courage?
>
> **You**: Courage is being willing to take big risks without knowing how it's going to work out.
>
> **Socrates**: Such as risking your life?
>
> **You**: Yes.
>
> **Socrates**: Is courage good?
>
> **You**: Yes.
>
> **Socrates**: Do you want it for yourself and your children?
>
> **You**: Yes.
>
> **Socrates**: Do you want your children to go around risking their lives?
>
> **You**: No. Maybe I should've said that courage is taking prudent risks, where you know what you are doing.
>
> **Socrates**: Like an expert investor who knows how to risk money to make lots more?
>
> **You**: No, that isn't courageous. . . .

At this point, your pathways are blocked. You cannot say courage is ignorant risk-taking, and you cannot say courage is prudent risk-taking. You do not have a way

forward. You are in what Socrates's interlocutors called *aporia*, a state of confusion in which there is nowhere for you to go.

Suppose that the conversation goes no further than this—that, as is typical for Socrates's interlocutors, you storm off in a huff at this point. Where does that leave you, and where does that leave Socrates?

Let's start with you first. You might be in a worse mood than you were when you encountered Socrates, but he hasn't harmed you. In fact, you are better off than you were: you've learned that courage isn't as easy to define as you initially thought it was. Being improved isn't always pleasant.

Second, Socrates has learned something. Courage seems to involve something like endurance or holding fast, but it cannot straightforwardly be identified with such a state—not even when we add some other ingredients, such as wisdom. Before this conversation, Socrates didn't know what courage was. Now his ignorance can take a more specific shape: he doesn't know what the connection between courage and endurance is. He still knows that he doesn't know what courage is, but his knowledge of his own ignorance has been improved, made more precise.

It's one thing to say, "I don't know anything." That thought comes cheap. One can wonder, "Who really and truly knows anything?" in a way that is dismissive, uninquisitive, detached. It can be a way of saying, "Knowledge is unattainable, so why even try?" Socratic humility is more expensive and more committal than that. He sought to map the terrain of his ignorance, to plot its mountains and its rivers, to learn to navigate it. That, I think, is why he speaks of knowledge of his own ignorance. He's not just someone who acknowledges or admits to his ignorance, but someone who has learned to dwell within it.

Admittedly, this may seem like a paradoxical project. It's one thing to be missing your wallet—you will know it once you've found it. But suppose you're missing not only your wallet, but also the knowledge that you ever had a wallet, and the understanding of what a wallet is. One of Socrates's interlocutors, Meno, doubts whether it's possible to come to know anything if you know so little to begin with. If someone doesn't know where she's going, it doesn't seem as though she can even take a first step in the right direction. Can you map in total darkness?

Socrates's answer was no. Or at least: you can't do it alone. The right response to noticing one's own ignorance is to try to escape it by acquiring someone else's knowledge. But the only way to do that is to explain to them why you aren't yet able to accept this or that claim of theirs as knowledge—and that is what mapping one's ignorance amounts to. Socrates stages an exhibition of this method for Meno by demonstrating how much geometrical progress he can make with a young slave boy by doing nothing but asking questions that expose the boy's false assumptions. It is when he refutes others' claims to knowledge that Socrates's own ignorance takes shape, for him, as something he can know. What appears as a sea of darkness when approached introspectively turns out to be navigable when brought into contact with the knowledge claims of another.

Socrates was an unusual person. Consider his response to the oracle. Most people who are proclaimed wise by a trusted authority don't have the impulse to disprove that authority. Instead, they bask in the glory of the assessment of themselves that they have spent their whole lives longing to hear. Most people steer conversations into areas where they have expertise; they struggle to admit error; they have a background confidence that they have a firm grip on the basics. They are happy to think of other people—people who have different political or religious views, or got a different kind of education, or live in a different part of the world—as ignorant and clueless. They are eager to claim the status of knowledge for everything they themselves think.

But Socrates did not take this difference as grounds to despise or dismiss this group, aka Most People (*hoi polloi*). He saw, instead, that he and Most People were a match made in heaven. Most People put forward claims, and Socrates refutes them. Most People see the need to possess truths. Socrates saw the danger of acquiring falsehoods. Most People feel full of rich insights and brilliant thoughts. Socrates saw himself as bereft of all of that. Without the help of Most People, Socrates wouldn't have anything to think about. Socrates's neediness did not escape his own notice. In the *Theaetetus*, he describes himself as a kind of midwife—barren of knowledge himself, but engaged in "delivering" the wisdom-babies of Most People.

Socrates saw the pursuit of knowledge as a collaborative project involving two very different roles. There's you or I or some other representative of Most People, who comes forward and makes a bold claim. Then there's Socrates, or one of his contemporary descendants, who questions and interrogates and distinguishes and calls for clarification. This is something we're often still doing—as philosophers, as scientists, as interviewers, as friends, on Twitter and Facebook and in many casual personal conversations. We're constantly probing one another, asking, "How can you say that, given X, Y, Z?" We're still trying to understand one another by way of objection, clarification, and the simple fact of inability to take what someone has said as knowledge. It comes so naturally to us to organize ourselves into the knower/objector pairing that we don't even notice we are living in the world that Socrates made. The scope of his influence is remarkable. But equally remarkable is the means by which it was achieved: he did so much by knowing, writing, and accomplishing—nothing at all.

And yet for all this influence, many of our ways are becoming far from Socratic. More and more our politics are marked by unilateral persuasion instead of collaborative inquiry. If, like Socrates, you view knowledge as an essentially collaborative project, you don't go into a conversation expecting to persuade any more than you expect to be persuaded. By contrast, if you do assume you know, you embrace the role of persuader in advance, and stand ready to argue people into agreement. If argument fails, you might tolerate a state of disagreement—but if the matter is serious enough, you'll resort to enforcing your view through incentives or punishments. Socrates's method eschewed the pressure to persuade. At the same time, he did not tolerate tolerance.

His politics of humility involved genuinely opening up the question under dispute, in such a way that neither party would be permitted to close it, to settle on an answer, unless the other answered the same. By contrast, our politics—of persuasion, tolerance, incentives, and punishment—is deeply uninquisitive.

Plato depicts Socrates's final moments in the *Phaedo*. Before he fulfills his death sentence by drinking the hemlock, he offers up a series of arguments about the immortality of the soul. Each argument attempts to improve upon the previous one's failure to show the people around him that his death is not something to be mourned. Despite the brilliance, refinement, and detail of argumentation, he does not convince his interlocutors. From much experience teaching and reading the dialogue, I can say that he does not convince its readers, either. Arguably, he does not even manage to convince himself. He died as he lived, ignorant and inquiring.

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Agnes Callard is Associate Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies in Philosophy at the University of Chicago and author of Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming.

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