Is the Socratic Method Still Relevant?

When is thinking most likely to occur?

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January 8, 2025

Key points

- In a new book, Agnes Callard shows how the Socratic Method can be used to examine fundamental life issues.
- Socrates claimed that the object of a total, unconditional acceptance of love should not be a person.
- Socratic conversations establish "a substantive kind of equality" among seekers of the truth.

Review of *Open Socrates: The Case for a Philosophical Life*. By Agnes Callard. W.W. Norton & Company. 405 pp. $35.

Many know that Socrates declared that "the unexamined life is not worth living." And that he was tried, convicted, and sentenced to death for "corrupting the youth" of Athens. Far fewer of us understand the essential features of "The Socratic Method."

In *Open Socrates*, Agnes Callard (a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago and author of *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming*) explicates and celebrates his method, as laid out in Plato's dialogues. Callard then shows how Socrates did—and she can—use it to examine fundamental issues in our lives, including justice, equality, love, and death.

Although Socrates' approach relied on reason, not emotion, and thinking, not feeling, Callard's accessible and immensely insightful book should command the attention of armchair and professional psychologists and philosophers.

Much more than a banal invocation of cautious skepticism and open-mindedness, the Socratic Method, Callard demonstrates, begins with an assumption that thinking is most likely to occur as a social activity among people who disagree about things that matter but are receptive to more definitive answers. In his conversations, Socrates played the roles of gadfly and midwife. He engaged in sharp, but not adversarial refutation, designed to cure "normative self-blindness." A masterful practitioner of "inquiry," designed to reach knowledge, its endpoint, after hypotheses were batted back and forth, Socrates maintained that he was just as happy to be refuted as he was to refute.

According to Callard, Socrates acknowledged that two or more people with different backgrounds and beliefs might not make any headway. He insisted, however, that progress is possible, especially when one person asks probing questions and his or her interlocutor responds candidly.

In response, perhaps, to destructive political polarization and siloed sources of information and opinion in the United States in the 21st century, Callard suggests that true freedom of speech is not available to individuals who believe they must conform

to what others have said or expect us to say. By contrast, Socratic conversations establish "a substantive kind of equality" among seekers of the truth who recognize "a deep intellectual need" to inquire with one another.

Demonstrably different from agreeing to disagree (which deep down means, "I'm right, you're wrong"), engaging with someone whose point of view conflicts with yours involves treating that person as your equal. In the outside world, giving voice to an idea can be dangerous; in the inner world, "the world above the world," your vote "is the only one that's called for." The only danger an idea presents is falsity.

"We live together because we think together," Callard concludes. "Politics has an intellectual foundation."

The oddest thing Socrates said about any topic, Callard declares, is his claim that the object of a total, unconditional acceptance of love should not be a person. He perceived no difference between romantic love and love for family and friends. Socrates was polyamorous: He sought to share an intimate connection, openness, and vulnerability with those who participated in his search for "the good."

Love, Socrates maintained, should be based on mutual dissatisfaction, not admiring acceptance of people for who they are or for their companionship. In a comment that may resonate with some modern audiences, Socrates opined, "The only thing I would not advise is that we remain as we are." And, Callard reveals, Socrates, who claimed "expertise in love," described his encounters in majestic, ecstatic, erotic poetry and prose about the soul's yearning for flight "that bears more resemblance to an idea than to your flesh and blood lover."

Socrates was never more Socratic, Callard implies than when, in his final hours of life, he encouraged his friends to refute his belief in the immortality of the soul and give little thought to anything but the truth. Warning them of his own bias, Socrates summarized what he knew: "Either the dead are nothing and have no perception of anything, or it is, as we are told, a change and a relocating for the soul from here to another place."

And, 2,500 years later, Callard reminds us, not much has changed. Beliefs on both sides are asserted "with passionate certainty," with more than a few inclined to waver from those beliefs. Socrates would not tolerate wavering, even if, Callard speculates, he was subject to it when he was alone in his cell, "because it gets in the way of the attempt to inquire as to which of those results is actually true."

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