

It was time to wrap up our dialogue, so this last comment was left unchallenged. But it stayed with me long after the dialogue ended. Over the years I've heard many others say variations of the same thing as this history professor—namely, that Socrates was seeking ignorance because he claimed he didn't know anything

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authoritatively. But I don't think this is so. There's a big difference between claiming to know something and claiming to know something authoritatively. Socrates falls in the first camp. He'd never make a claim like "I know because I don't know." I think he'd have considered such a statement disingenuous at best. Socrates was intensely committed to the task of discovering what it was to be an excellent human being, and he did teach people a specific way, or method, of becoming more and more enlightened about how to become more virtuous. Many philosophers ever since, from Hume to Descartes to Wittgenstein to Russell, have taken this "skeptical attitude"—what I call this Socratic sensibility—as their own launching pad for gaining insight into many of life's most vexing conundrums. And this sensibility has always been associated with the most searching and penetrating analyses of the great philosophers.

All who adopt this sensibility are unwilling to accept conclusions unless there are very convincing grounds for them. A Zen master might exhort you, "Don't think: Look!" because when you're thinking, you're trying to understand instead of bathing yourself in direct experience. But Socrates would exhort you: "Look. And think. Then look some more. And think some more. Don't ever stop looking, or thinking." He would maintain that thinking is a form of looking, a form of direct experience. If you look without thinking, then that would be intentional ignorance, a kind of blindness. But if you look and think, if you observe and think, and also listen to others' perspectives on what they observe and think, then you'll still be ignorant, but not quite as ignorant. You'll have inched a little further along the Socratic version of the path of enlightenment.

And by inching along in this fashion, by seeking the truth gropingly, you become less and less ignorant. You gain what might be called wisdom of a certain sort, "Socratic wisdom,"

which amounts to this: You are better able to determine what you do know—what stands up to rigorous scrutiny—and what you do not know. You become aware of the existing limits of your knowledge, but in a way that inspires you to push those limits further and further outward. As Richard Tarnas puts it, for Socrates "the discovery of ignorance was just the beginning of the philosophical task," not the end. After discovering one's ignorance, one can then "begin to overcome one's received assumptions that obscured the true nature of what it was to be a human being." Socrates was reviled by many Athenians for showing them how murky and confused was their use of such concepts as courage, justice, the good, and virtue. They resented his insistence on critically analyzing the exact meaning of propositions and determining the precise extent to which they were true. Yet reflective examination, among other things, can show us that some errors stem from inaccurate knowledge, others from faulty reasoning, and still others from careless use of language.

To this day, Socrates' example continues to teach us how to expand our own intellectual and imaginative horizons. He was extremely critical of those who let other people do their thinking for them. He saw his role as akin to that of a midwife; he helped people give birth to their own ideas, and to work through the particular beliefs by which they could choose to live.

TRUE TEACHING

Above all, Socrates has passed on to us the conviction that we must be willing to subject our beliefs radically and continually to encounter upon encounter, from without and from within. Socrates engaged in what Laszlo Versenyi describes as "true teach-

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