

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

Christopher
Phillips

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-

From: Socrates Café
Christopher Phillips, 2001

ing," the centerpiece of which is "a questioning of accepted opinions, an examination of beliefs, a refutation of dogmas, a testing of knowledge and an indictment of ignorance."

It is humbling, to be sure, for a person to discover that much of what he thought he knew was based on a foundation of quicksand. But as Socrates says in Plato's *Theaetetus*, "If you should ever conceive again . . . your budding thoughts should be better as a result of this scrutiny. . . ." In Plato's *Meno*, Socrates first catechized the young slave in such a way that he came to realize he didn't know what he thought he knew. Socrates didn't do this to make the boy look silly, much less to discourage him from learning. To the contrary, as Socrates himself explains in *Meno*, "By making him perplexed and giving him a shock we haven't done him any harm . . . rather, we've helped him toward finding the truth, for now he'll search gladly, seeing. . . . But do you think he would have tried to search and to acquire knowledge while he thought he knew what he did not know, before he was reduced to the perplexity of being aware that he did not know and this yearning for knowledge? . . . Now, because of his loss, he will find out something, searching with me. . . ."

"*Sed omnia praeclara tam difficilia quam rara sunt*," Spinoza writes at the end of his *Ethics*: "Everything excellent is as difficult as it is rare." Yet our ideas of "excellence" today seem all too often tied to the acquisition of material wealth. But it is neither exceedingly difficult nor rare for shrewd investors with considerable money to begin with to rake in gobs more money in a bullish economy. Nor is it difficult, or rare, for today's philosopher-sophists, just as in the days of Socrates, to "counsel" the wealthy that virtually *any* goal they set for themselves and then go on to accomplish is "excellent." They steer clear at all costs from Socrates' view that "virtue does not come from wealth, but . . . wealth and every good thing that men have . . . comes from virtue."

In my travels, I've even encountered a few academic philosophers who philosophize with private "clients" at hefty hourly rates. Some seem threatened that I don't aim to profit from philosophizing with the public; and they resent that I show people, many of whom never have and never will take a university course in philosophy, how to facilitate discussions themselves using the Socratic method. They want all "public philosophers" to have graduate degrees in philosophy, and to be "certified"; and they want to charge tidy sums for such certification. To them, it's vital that the general public philosophize only with a specialist, and at a cost.

I've encountered some today who, like the fee-charging Sophists of old, take pains to disparage Socrates himself. They maintain that if Socrates earned no wages from his philosophizing, then he already had money or was propped up by wealthy friends, a classic sophism. It's easy to say that only the rich or their coterie can afford to give short shrift to purely moneymaking endeavors; but it is a great insult to the countless people who disavow material gain in order to devote their lives to higher causes. And Plato's *Apology* makes crystal clear that Socrates willingly lived in extreme poverty in order to stay true to his ideals.

Socrates engaged in a lifelong pursuit of a type of excellence that no amount of money could buy. Of the wealthy who might inspire to be his patrons today, I'd like to think he might ask: Is it possible to envision a society in which the gap between rich and poor is much less dramatic than it is now? Are you responsible for the well-being of your fellow humans? What is more important, the way you earn your money or the fact that you are successful at it? What is "success"? Is it still "excellent" if the corporations responsible for your windfall are responsible for environmental degradation and labor exploitation?

HUMAN EXCELLENCE

Christopher
Phillips

To Socrates, an excellent human being is one who strives to acquire certain virtues, such as temperance, courage, and wisdom. Why? Because the acquisition of such virtues creates a different kind of wealth—a wealth of empathy, of imaginative vision, of self-discovery.

Implicit within the “Socratic virtues” is this injunction: You can only attain human excellence if you also strive to make it possible for your fellow humans to do so too. To embrace this injunction requires both a social conscience and an imaginative vision that has always been difficult and rare.

In the *Apology*, his fate in the balance, Socrates has this to say to his fellow Athenians:

As long as I breathe and have the strength to go on, I won't quit philosophizing, I won't quit exhorting you and whomever I happen to meet, in my customary way: Esteemed friend, citizen of Athens, the greatest city in the world, so outstanding in both intelligence and power, aren't you ashamed to care so much to make all the money you can, and to advance your reputation and prestige—while for truth and wisdom and the improvement of your soul you have no care or worry?

To Socrates, a person “should only consider whether, in doing anything, he is doing right or wrong—acting the part of a good man or bad.”

At the end of Plato's *Phaedo*, the moving dialogue that describes the final moments of Socrates' life, his closest friends visit

him in his prison cell. Just before he drinks the hemlock, they ask him what they can do to “be of most service” to him. Socrates has just one request: he bids them to continue to “follow that path of life” which they have discovered, over the course of many rich dialogues together, makes life worth living.

SOCRATES
CAFÉ