Elements of the Method

THIS chapter explains the elements of the Socratic method: the features that the dialogues have in common and that might be considered essential to the style of inquiry favored by Socrates.

A skeletal example. What *is* the Socratic method? The term is a modern invention; Plato never referred to a method, and Socrates never sets forth his procedures in a systematic manner. He shows rather than tells. I don't quite propose to define the method, either. It will be more productive to identify some recurring elements that are found in the way Socrates carries out his part in the dialogues.

We should start by looking at an example. It isn't feasible to reprint an entire dialogue here, but we can walk through an outline of one—the *Laches* (pronounced *lay*-keez), in which Socrates and some companions talk about the meaning of courage. Later in the book we will see many actual quotations from this and other dialogues. The skeleton that follows is a paraphrase meant to show the overall shape that a typical dialogue might have. We aren't concerned now with whether the arguments are persuasive. We're simply interested in the style of reasoning the dialogue shows—in other words, the method.

The dialogue begins with a pair of fathers asking two generals whether the sons of the fathers should be trained to fight in armor. They turn to Socrates for his views. After some conversation about the benefits of such training, they conclude that the purpose of it is to develop courage. Socrates then turns the discussion to the *meaning* of courage. Here is how it runs.

> SOCRATES. What is courage?
> LACHES. It's what soldiers have when they hold their ground instead of running away from the enemy.
> SOCRATES. But that can't quite be right, can it? Some people show courage *while* running away from an enemy. You need a definition that covers them, too. Also, someone can be courageous in other situations—in politics or in poverty or in dealing with desires, for example. A definition of courage would

need to cover what courage in a soldier has in common with courage in all those other ways. Do you see what I mean?

LACHES. No.

SOCRATES. It's like defining speed. Speed can be shown in lots of settings—when someone is speaking or running or making music on a lyre. So we might say that speed *generally* means the ability to get a lot done in a short time. Courage is a quality, like speed. Can you describe it in a general way that is comparable?

LACHES. How about: at the most general level, courage means persistence of mind. [Or perseverance of spirit.]

SOCRATES. Okay, but I'm not sure you mean that, either. You think courage is admirable, right?

LACHES. Yes.

SOCRATES. And sometimes persistence can be foolish rather than wise, yes?

LACHES. True.

SOCRATES. And foolishness isn't admirable, is it?

LACHES. No.

SOCRATES. But you said that courage *is* admirable. So our definition seems wrong: it makes courage sometimes sound bad, but it's good.

LACHES. Yes, there's something wrong with the definition.

SOCRATES. Perhaps you meant that courage is *wise* or *intelligent* persistence of mind?

LACHES. That's better.

SOCRATES. Yet it still creates problems. First, some cases of intelligent persistence have nothing to do with courage, as when someone persistently invests money because it will produce a good return. That sort of person wouldn't be called courageous, right?

LACHES. Right. Not courageous.

SOCRATES. So the definition covers some cases that you think it shouldn't. But the definition also doesn't cover some cases that you probably think it should. Imagine a soldier who is persistent because he knows that help is on the way; compare him to one who is persistent but doesn't know that help is coming. Which is more courageous?

LACHES. The second one seems more courageous—the one who doesn't know that help is coming.
SOCRATES. Yet the persistence of the second one might seem *less* informed and *less* intelligent. In fact, it's starting to seem that courage might really be *unintelligent* persistence!
LACHES. Well, I'm sure that's wrong. I don't mean to produce that result.
SOCRATES. All right, but let's not give up. Let's show our own persistence, and try something different.
NICIAS. Maybe this captures the idea: courage really amounts to a kind of wisdom or knowledge.
SOCRATES. You can't mean just any sort of knowledge. Which kind?
NICIAS. A courageous person is one who understands what is worth fearing and what isn't.
LACHES. But doctors know what is worth fearing by their patients, yet we wouldn't necessarily describe doctors as courageous, would we?
NICIAS. Not on that account, no. But doctors just know what the physical effects of various things might be. They aren't experts on what is ultimately worth fearing and avoiding.
SOCRATES. So you must think that animals can't be courageous. They never have the kind of knowledge you describe, do they?
NICIAS. That's right. There's a difference between being fearless and courageous. I'd say some animals are fearless, but I wouldn't give them credit for courage.
SOCRATES. But still, there's another problem. Courage is just one kind of virtue—as opposed to, say, showing self-control or being just, right?
NICIAS. Yes.
SOCRATES. Good; I'll come back to that point. Now when we talk about knowledge of what's worth fearing, what does that really mean? It seems that something worth fearing can be described more generally and simply as a bad thing to come—an evil in the future, as opposed to something good in the future. Agreed?
NICIAS. Yes, fair enough.
SOCRATES. Courage, then, is the same as an understanding of what's truly good and truly evil in our possible futures—is that what

you'd say?

NICIAS. Yes, that sounds right.

SOCRATES. But if you understand whether something to come is worth fearing—in other words, whether it's an evil—then you also must know whether it was good or evil if it happened in the past. Judgments about what is genuinely bad, and what merely *seems* bad, shouldn't depend on whether it's coming or already happened, should they?

NICIAS. True enough.

SOCRATES. So then courage isn't just knowledge of whether things *to come* are worth fearing—that is, good or evil. It amounts to an understanding of what's good and what's evil, period—yes?

NICIAS. That does follow.

SOCRATES. But people who have *that* knowledge would have more than courage. Since they understand the true nature of what is good and what is evil, they would also be just and pious; indeed, it's hard to think of a virtue they *wouldn't* have, isn't it?

NICIAS. So it would seem.

SOCRATES. Yet we said that courage was just one kind of virtue. Now we've defined it in a way that covers too much. We've turned courage into a form of knowledge that doesn't make it distinctive from other virtues. So I'm worried that we still haven't figured out exactly what courage is.

NICIAS. No, it seems we haven't.

Elements. That sketch is abbreviated and leaves out many details. And you probably would have offered a different definition and made different objections. But leave those points to one side. Let's consider the style of reasoning the dialogue displays, which is typical of the Socratic method generally.

First, it proceeds by question and answer. Some of the questions are open-ended, as when Socrates asks Laches to propose a definition. At other points Socrates asks whether his partners agree with what he has said. Regardless, the result isn't a lecture and isn't quite an argument, either. Socrates gets his partners to consent to every step he takes. (This book will generally refer to the person being questioned as a "partner" of whoever is

asking the questions, because that is the best spirit in which to approach Socratic dialogue. The parties are doing something together.)

Second, Socrates is always focused on the consistency of his partners. He probes it with a device known as the elenchus. His partners make claims. Then Socrates gets them to agree to other things that turn out to be inconsistent with what they've just said. Now they feel compelled to refine their claims or abandon them. Notice that he doesn't say his partners are wrong. He says, "can we agree that the following idea is true?"—and then his partners conclude for themselves (with his prompting) that something they said earlier wasn't quite right.

Third, his questions identify the principle behind what his partners are saying. Then he shows that the principle doesn't cover things that it should, or that it does cover things that it shouldn't. For example, Laches offers a definition of courage: standing firm. But Socrates gets Laches to agree that the definition leaves out some cases that ought to be included, such as courage shown in retreat. Or Laches defines courage as persistence of mind, but that can't be right, either, because it goes too far. Sometimes persistence is stupid, and Laches agrees that courage isn't courage if it's stupid.

Fourth, Socrates uses concrete examples to drive his reasoning: soldiers running away, someone playing a lyre, doctors and their patients. The examples often involve everyday people and situations. Sometimes the everyday examples illustrate big conceptual points. Sometimes he uses them to build analogies between things that are familiar and things that aren't. One way or another, he tries to make headway on large issues by talking about specific cases that are easy to imagine.

Fifth, Socrates doesn't claim expertise. He confesses his own ignorance, and that is where the dialogue ends: at an impasse, and without an answer.

The Socratic method, broadly speaking, amounts to the skillful use of the elements just described. Each of those elements, as well as a few others that are less prominent, will be discussed and illustrated in the chapters to come, and chapters 17 and 18 will talk about how to devise those kinds of questions in familiar settings.

In a nutshell. Now I want to restate the usual workings of the Socratic method in more colloquial terms—that is, to suggest how the elements just recounted can be treated as a process that is practical and not in the least

esoteric. I'll oversimplify a bit here, and then the rest of the book will offer as much detail as the reader may choose to tolerate.

Let's say, then, that you just want to get going. Here is the Socratic method in crude form: When someone makes a claim about right and wrong or good and bad, question it. Ask what the claim means, and about other things its holder believes, and look for tension between those points; show with your questions that the claim must in some way be unsatisfactory to the person who made it. In effect you deny what your discussion partners say, but the denial is artful. If you do this right, it won't even sound like an argument. They will refine their claims, and now you do it again.

On a Socratic view, denying what someone says is the act of a friend; you should want friends who deny what *you* say. Such denials produce good things. If someone has a talent for denying your claims (hopefully with some indirection and tact), you might change your mind for the better. If not, you're at least likely to end up with a better sense of why you think what you do. You will more clearly see the details and qualifications that go with it. You might become less sure what you think altogether. That will feel like a loss, but you will be closer to the truth, even if it's a truth that, in some cases, you may never finally reach. In that event you still hold beliefs, but you hold them a little differently. You're more humble, more aware of your ignorance, less likely to be sure when you shouldn't be, and more understanding of others. Socrates regarded these as great gains in wisdom.

All this is what Socratic partners try to do for each other. They are good-natured and subtle contrarians. In practice this might nevertheless sound like a set of instructions for becoming unpopular or getting yourself killed. That's what it was for Socrates. Take heart, though: describing the method as something practiced by one person on another is mostly a convenience to illustrate how it works. In real life—and when reading Plato, too—Socratic questioning is better viewed mostly as a way to think about hard questions on your own. You challenge yourself and harass yourself and test what you think and deny what you say, all as a Socrates would. That might sound easier than doing it to others. In fact it's considerably harder. But it's also more rewarding and less dangerous.

Consistency. We have seen that the Socratic method involves the use of questions to test one's consistency. We will talk more about this point in Chapters 6 and 7, but a further word about it is in order now because

consistency can sound at first like a boring aim of modest importance. To Socrates it is everything. Not that he is against people changing their minds; quite the contrary. The consistency he wants is between the different things you claim to think at any given time. To put it more practically, Socrates starts with whatever you say—call it X. Then he gets you to admit that you also believe Y. Then he causes you to see for yourself that X and Y are inconsistent. Neither has been proven wrong, but at least *one* of them must be. Since you can't believe both, you're forced to change one or the other. So Socrates isn't your antagonist; he's the one who shows you that you are your own antagonist.

That sketch makes the Socratic method sound like something that anyone can use, because it is. But using it *well* is an art. Asking good Socratic questions takes ingenuity, especially when it comes to spotting Y—the thing you believe, perhaps deep down, that is inconsistent with whatever you've just said. Sometimes Y has to be drawn out with hypothetical questions that you hadn't thought about before. It also takes stamina to keep answering such questions when they get uneasy. All this is why it's easier to put Socratic questions to someone else than to do it in your own thinking, which is always hard and sometimes seems impossible. So we don't need to worry about thinking Socratically all the time. Nobody does, or ever did. The question is whether we do it any of the time, and how we might do it better and more often.

The Socratic style of reasoning is potent. If you want to get closer to the truth, working out inconsistencies in your own thinking is a powerful way to do it; the task may sound unassuming, but it can turn one's approach to life upside down. If you want to refute the claims of others, showing inconsistencies in their thinking is a powerful way to do it; it can leave an argument, or the maker of it, in tatters. And a failure to think Socratically, in the sense just described, is at the root of most of what's foolish and infuriating in our ethical and political culture. People routinely say things that they don't really believe, or wouldn't believe if they thought longer about it. By "wouldn't believe," I mean that what they say isn't consistent with other things they believe more deeply. Or they wouldn't say it if the facts were changed in ways that they think should be irrelevant.

All this usually seems obvious when listening to others with whom we disagree. When it comes to ourselves, it's not obvious; it's invisible, though just as likely to be the case. A large share of the Socratic struggle, whether

in philosophy or politics and law, is to separate claims from rooting interests, so that when you praise or condemn something, you mean you would praise or condemn it with the same force no matter who did it. Or, if not, that you can explain why not. You stay ruthlessly consistent. This is all difficult to do, and won't get you a job writing op-ed pieces. But it helps prevent more additions to the riot of arrogance and hypocrisy that is modern political discourse.

Indirection. The elements we've considered might make the Socratic method seem to be purely a matter of technique—a set of steps that push understanding forward. It can be just that. But the method also has indirect aims. Socrates often tries to persuade his partners of one claim or another. But he accomplishes more by his efforts than persuasion, and also less: the persuasion might not happen, but other things do. The same can happen when you read a dialogue. You aren't quite convinced by the arguments, so the dialogue seems to fail on its stated terms. But it succeeds on other terms, which are probably its real terms. It affects us. We will see other examples of such indirection as we go along—Socrates saying something other than exactly what he means, or Plato doing the same through Socrates. Indirection is, we might say, an additional feature of the Socratic method, but one that is better left off the list of formal elements and appreciated indirectly.

Some examples of such indirect benefits are discussed by Mill. He thought many of the arguments made by Socrates were bad. His leading example is the *Gorgias*, a dialogue in which Socrates talks with three others about the relationship between justice and happiness, the pleasant and the good, and various other ideas. It is one of Plato's most celebrated works. Yet there is widespread modern agreement that at least some of the arguments Socrates makes are defective,[1] and Mill said that "they are nearly all of them fallacies."[2] This might seem to call the value of the dialogue into question, since the arguments look like the whole point of it. But Mill thought otherwise.

> It is not by its logic, but by its ἦθος [ethos], that [the dialogue] produces its effects; not by instructing the understanding, but by working on the feelings and imagination. Nor is this strange; for the disinterested love of virtue is an affair of feeling. It is

> impossible to prove to any one Plato's thesis, that justice is supreme happiness, unless he can be made to feel it as such.… The Socrates of the dialogue makes us feel all other evils to be more tolerable than injustice in the soul, not by proving it, but by the sympathy he calls forth with his own intense feeling of it.[3]

Mill's claim can seem to be a paradox. The Socratic method looks at first like the ultimate rational enterprise. Socrates—the hero—uses logic to fight illusion and falsehood and vice until at last he is overtaken by the enemy and nobly elects not to capitulate but to die for his devotion to the truth. Beginners view the heart of the story as the logic. Later, maybe after discovering that the logic is not always very compelling, we understand the heart of the story to be the fight, the nobility, and the devotion. And yet those good things are, on the Socratic model, best obtained not by dwelling on them but by dwelling on what inspires them: the truth, and its passionate pursuit by rational means.

The most important feature of a dialogue, when seen in this way, isn't whether its arguments are finally persuasive. The most important feature is the effect that the dialogue has on the reader. Sometimes arguments that fail, or that refute one another, help an audience toward a certain understanding or frame of mind. That frame of mind may be more valuable than being persuaded of this proposition or that one. The frame of mind may be a new perspective from which it is apparent that *all* the propositions in the dialogue are inadequate. It may be a perspective from which the chase after the truth is seen to be the highest human pursuit even if (or perhaps *because*) the complete capture of that truth is not possible. A reader sometimes is brought to such a perspective more effectively by taking part in an exhausting and failed chase rather than by being told to adopt the perspective directly.[4]

This pattern repeats in other ways in the study of Socrates. Side effects turn out to be more valuable than primary ones. At first, for example, Ben Franklin regarded the Socratic method as a bag of tricks for winning arguments.

> I found this method the safest for myself and very embarrassing to those against whom I used it; therefore, I took delight in it, practiced it continually, and grew very artful and expert in

> drawing people, even of superior knowledge, into concessions the consequences of which they did not foresee, entangling them in difficulties out of which they could not extricate themselves, and so obtaining victory that neither myself nor my causes always deserved.[5]

The dialogues warn about this pattern.[6] Eventually Franklin grew in wisdom and abandoned it. But he kept some indirect benefits of his Socratic studies. They were milder in character than the ones described by Mill but evidently served him well.

> I continued this method some few years, but gradually left it, retaining only the habit of expressing myself in terms of modest diffidence.… This habit, I believe, has been of great advantage to me when I have had occasion to inculcate my opinions and persuade men into measures that I have been from time to time engaged in promoting; and, as the chief ends of conversion are to inform or to be informed, to please or to persuade, I wish well-meaning, sensible men would not lessen their power of doing good by a positive, assuming manner, that seldom fails to disgust, tends to create opposition, and to defeat every one of those purposes for which speech was given to us, to wit, giving or receiving information or pleasure.[7]

Franklin's remarks about persuasion have much merit. We will come back to those points in chapter 18. I show these comments from Mill and Franklin here, however, to support a general approach to our subject. The time anyone spends in Socratic dialogue with others or oneself is always going to be rewarding but, in the end, is never going to be long. But the Socratic method also means to change one's way of thinking when it isn't directly in use. It produces a mindset that is useful hourly. It's like studying a martial art for a lifetime but never using it in a fight. The benefits can still be felt all the time if it makes the student a different sort of person.

The Socratic ethic. That is how this book means to present the Socratic method. Plato's dialogues show how the elements of the method can work in a specific and pure context: a long one-on-one conversation about a hard

ethical question. But you can have a Socratic dialogue that doesn't include all the elements of the method; and more to the point, you can use the elements when you aren't having a dialogue. The search for consistency, for example, is presented in the dialogues as a formal way to structure a conversation. But once that point is understood, the value of consistency seems greater all the way around. You think more about it whether you're asking Socratic questions or not. And indeed, after seeing lots of Socratic questions, and lots of inflated claims punctured by them, you may not need to see every new claim punctured to get the point. You *know* how easily fat claims can be punctured, and many slender ones, too. You think and live accordingly.

The same might be said for drawing careful distinctions, for the value of speaking the truth, or any of the other customs and byproducts associated with the method. They produce a Socratic ethic that can become pervasive: a way of being, more than a technique. You don't wait around to be Socratic until you find someone who wants to be grilled or to perform a Socratic grilling. (It might be a long wait.) You're being Socratic when you press skeptically against easy answers, go many questions deep, and are mindful of your ignorance. These aren't modest aims; they change the way one responds to everything. Seeing them acted out in dialogues is a good way to learn about their value, but that value isn't found principally in dialogues that we rarely conduct. It is found in the way we think about problems every day.

The Socratic ethic can also help explain a certain kind of life story. Some people spend years struggling with hard questions and never quite find peace about them. They sometimes look with envy at others who seem to have found satisfactory answers early. Not having found answers of their own feels like unfinished work, a road half traveled, a test not completed. But the Socratic view is the other way around. Dissatisfaction with the answers you give yourself is a symptom of good health. Coming to rest means surrender to a kind of comfort that is always deceptive, no matter how tempting it looks or how deserved it feels. The Socratic way seeks a different kind of comfort—with uncertainty, with fallibility, and with beliefs that are never more than provisional. On this view the good life isn't a result reached by winning the struggle. The struggle is the good life.

1. Santas, *Socrates*, 260–303, is a comprehensive and rigorous analysis, and it contains references to other sources as well.

2. Mill, “Grote’s Plato,” 11:415.

3. Mill, 11:416. For extended discussion of how the Socratic legacy played out in Mill’s life and work, see the essays collected in Demetriou and Antis, *John Stuart Mill: A British Socrates.*

4. For more discussion of this way of looking at the dialogues, see Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature.*

5. Cairns, *Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography*, 17.

6. See Book VII of the *Republic*, especially 539b.

7. Cairns, *Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography*, 17.