

ON SOCRATIC QUESTIONING

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Note: This commentary is based on concepts, ideas, theories, historical documentation, and language from www.changingminds.org and Emily Wilson's book *The Death of Socrates* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

The pedagogy that I share with students thrives on Socratic questioning. Socratic questioning has often been stereotyped in legal studies as an aggressive form of competitive, investigatory interrogation. This is not what I mean by Socratic questioning. For me, Socratic questioning aims to do what the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates did in his pedagogy of *ex duco*. Ex duco means to “lead out” and leading students to think through and discover the structure, meaning, and nature of problems through questioning and answering is (for me) the root of education.

ABOUT SOCRATES

Socrates (c. 469 to 399 BCE) was a former member of the Athenian military and a teacher of philosophy and rhetoric in ancient Greece. He left no surviving texts. We know of his life and work through the writings of his students, especially the Dialogues of Plato and Xenophon; the treatises of Aristotle; and plays like *The Clouds* by Aristophanes. Plato and Xenophon's characterizations of Socrates depart considerably from the theatrical parodies of Aristophanes. For example, in Plato's *Symposium* Socrates is depicted as never accepting payment for his educational services. This is an important detail because the Sophists were criticized for commercializing the teaching of rhetoric. But in *The Clouds* Aristophanes depicts Socrates as running a school and charging pupils.

Socrates (called the “gadfly” of Athens in Plato's *Apology*) ran afoul of the Athenian establishment just as the city-state was defeated by Sparta and internal discord ensued. His praise of Sparta, his development of a critical method that fore-grounded the search for truth over political expediency—both of these attributes made him a target of the state. He may also have been guilty of hubris (false pride) in presenting himself as wiser than most intellectuals during his time. He was accused by the religious hierarchy of the time of forming his own sense of a deity, the *daimonion*, which Socrates considered to be a kind of advanced moral intuition, a personal god that exists within us.

Plato's *Crito* explains that Socrates was put on trial for heresy, refused his friends offers to assist him in escape, and convicted of corrupting the young of Athens and sentenced to a death by poison. Then, as Plato's *Phaedo* describes, Socrates committed suicide in prison. Socrates' most important intellectual contribution was his development of the *elenchus* method of systematic investigation of abstract moral ideas of truth and justice. Radically, Socrates claims that two women influenced his thought: Diotima, a

priestess and Aspasia, the alleged consort of the warrior Pericles. Plato's *Symposium* presents Diotima as educating Socrates in the art of *eros*, or erotic love.

Here are six kinds of Socratic questioning distilled from ancient writings about Socrates and his pedagogical approach.

CLARIFYING

Why are you saying that?
 What exactly do you mean?
 How does this relate to what we have been talking about?
 What is the nature of things?
 What do we already know about this?
 Can you give me an example this?
 Are you saying _____ or _____?
 Can you rephrase for clarity?

DISPELLING ASSUMPTIONS

What else could we assume or not assume by the premises that you espouse?
 You seem to be assuming _____. Why are you making these assumptions?
 How did you choose those assumptions?
 How can you verify or disprove your assumptions?
 What would happen if _____?
 Do you agree or disagree with _____?

PROBING RATIONALE, REASONS AND EVIDENCE

Why is that happening?
 How do you know this?
 Show me evidence?
 Can you give me an example of that?
 What do you think causes _____?
 What is the nature of this?
 Are these reasons good enough?
 Would it stand up in court, or in a community of fair-minded peers who may disagree?
 How might it be refuted?
 How can I be sure of what you are saying?
 Why is _____ happening?
 Why, why, why?
 How, how, how?
 What evidence is there to support what you are saying?
 On what authority are you basing your argument?
 What is the audience to which you are pitching your argument?
 Will your audience digest this?
 How will audience not in your peer group understand or engage this?

QUESTIONING VIEWPOINTS AND PERSPECTIVES

Another way of looking at this is ____; does this seem reasonable?

What are some alternative ways of looking at this?

Why it is ____ necessary?

If the roles were reversed then what would happen?

Who benefits from this?

What is the difference between ____ and ____?

Why is it better than ____ in your view?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of ____?

How are ____ and ____ similar?

What would ____ say about it?

What if you compared ____ and ____?

How could you look another way at this?

PROBING IMPLICATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

Are you over-determining cause and effect?

Then what would happen?

What are the consequences of that assumption?

How could ____ be used to ____?

What are the implications of ____?

To whom is it important—how and why?

How does it affect ____?

How does ____ fit with what we learned before?

Why is ____ important, significant, or urgent?

What is the best outcome or conclusion that may be drawn from your evidence and why?

QUESTIONING THE QUESTION

What was the point of asking that question?

Why do you think I asked this question?

What might be the significance of this question?

What is the power within this question?

How does this question contribute to disempowerment?

How does this question encode good or faulty assumptions?