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PHILOSOPHY, REFLECTION

The Socratic Dialectical Method

If my questioner were a professor of the eristic and contentious sort, I should say to him: I have made my statement; if it is wrong, your business is to examine and refute it.

–Meno 75c,d

Most dabblers in philosophy, myself included, are the contentious sort, asserting our opinion and rejecting others' without giving any reason as to why our opinion is better. As a result, discussions tend to end in futility, with both sides going away unimpressed and unaffected. By contrast, the Socratic dialogues often end in unanimous consensus among the interlocutors, with others subscribing to Socrates' point of view and seemingly unable to muster any kind of intellectual resistance, as if they were stunned by a torpedo fish.

How does Socrates conquer his opponents time and time again? The short answer is that Socrates always turns his opponents against themselves –if anyone can do that, he'll never suffer defeat. He is able to prove that his opponents opinions are self-contradictory, and thereby uncover and eliminate false opinions. The Socratic method have the following characteristics:

The dialectical way is not merely to answer what is true, but also to make use of those points which the questioned person acknowledges he knows.

–Meno 75d

I. He must know and make use of those things which his opponent acknowledges to be true. In other words, the dialectical method must start with a consensus, in order to reach a consensus by causal reasoning. Unlike in battles, where the two parties take up their positions opposite each other and try to conquer the other side by force. Socrates always comes to the side of his interlocutors, as a starting point of a joint journey and inquiry, and gradually lead them step by step to his own position. This requires a tremendous amount of patience and genuine goodwill, which most debaters lack, who are only interested in winning arguments.

Any one who has an intellectual affinity to Socrates and enters into conversation with him is liable to be drawn into an argument; and whatever subject he may start, he will be continually carried round and round by him, until at last he finds that he has to give an account both of his present and past life ; and when he is once entangled, Socrates will not let him go until he has completely and thoroughly sifted him.

–Laches 187e,188a

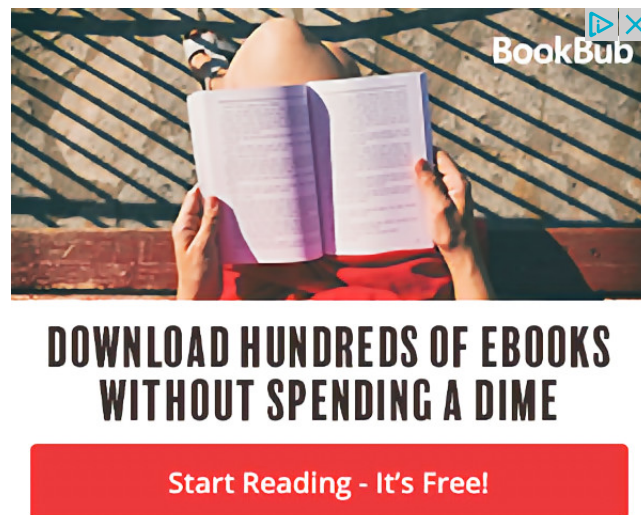
II. Absolute intellectual honesty is required in order for the dialectical method to work. Socrates likens this to a patient being examined by a doctor, and answering the doctor's probing questions about his body with an honest Yes or No answer, so the illness, if any, can be properly diagnosed. The interlocutor must be prepared to bare his mind and soul, to be cross-examined by others and answer questions with an unequivocal Yes or No. This precludes any evasion or indecision. The interlocutor has to make a plain and open admission of what he knows and believes, and what he doesn't.

III. Socrates likens teaching to leading a person from one place to another. In order to lead others, the teacher must have walked the path himself and can retrace his steps. This is analogous to making a chain of logical inference from one point to another. The admission of Yes and No is analogous to making a choice at a crossroad. The dialectical method thus leads one to construct for himself and follow a chain of causal reasoning, and he is bound to discover for himself whether or not the logical consequences of his opinions are self-contradictory.

IV. Some people argue that Socrates' method is negative and does not lead to knowledge, because he only proves the ignorance of his interlocutors. I think it is both positive and negative, precisely because Socrates cannot prove the ignorance of others unless he can prove their presumed knowledge contradicts the true knowledge. So he must have true knowledge in the first place. His method won't work if none of the interlocutors have any knowledge, or if they have exactly the same opinion.

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