

Socrates, Dialogue, and Us:  
Ignorance as Learning Paradigm

J. Gregory Keller, Ph.D.  
Department of Philosophy  
Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis  
425 University Blvd., CA 331A  
Indianapolis, IN 46202  
317.278.5738 (office) 317.704.1434 (home)  
[jgkeller@iupui.edu](mailto:jgkeller@iupui.edu)

Deborah Biss Keller, Ph.D.  
Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis  
Indiana University School of Education/University College, IUPUI  
ES 3108A  
902 West New York Street  
Indianapolis, IN 46202-5155  
Phone: 317.274.6853; Fax: 317.274.6864  
[dbkeller@iupui.edu](mailto:dbkeller@iupui.edu)

What has been the forgotten, the left out, the abandoned on the Western quest for knowledge, power, and self? Has it been the priority of the question and the inescapability of the spirit – an infinite that never falls prey wholly to totalization and particulars that can never be wholly subsumed under a universal? We find in Socrates a paradigm first of all of the ignorance that gives the lie to unrepentant certainties and, at the same time though often falsely hidden by that first, a dangerous obscuring of a second space for the resistance that lies at the heart of critical social practice. We aim in this chapter to contest the Socratic notion of ignorance, to the extent that it underlies and upholds the closing of minds to workable knowledge in favor of absolute and thus unreachable knowledge; yet also to play the value of Socratic not-knowing against Aristotelian categories of the perfect society built upon the subjection of ‘natural’ inferiors by masters, men, and the virtuous rich. In the end we suggest that epistemic poverty carries its own virtues that must not, however, obstruct the shared construction of resistance and hope out of the everyday particular knowing supplied both by common human experience and by the uncommon experience of the hidden others who lie invisible behind the curtain of social cohesion.

## The Forgotten

*We begin by asking ourselves what has been left out of our teaching and learning, our ways of knowing and acknowledging, our ways of re-cognizing or, for that matter, of not cognizing at all.* There is, of course, no single answer to this question – even seeking a unique answer reveals our lack of liberty in thinking. What we most often forget might simply amount to the priority of the question, the beginning that turns us away from ‘truth’ and the (alleged) perfection of our (alleged) knowledge and turns us toward the endless quest(ion).

Let us suppose, then, that the forgotten constitutes a significant category and that we can approach it as such – never forgetting that the notion of remembering that which is forgotten presents us with a dilemma. Whatever remains truly forgotten cannot of course just be brought to mind. Let us assume, nevertheless, that we can hope to attach some legitimate meaning to the forgotten and begin there. First of all, we could begin with the forgotten on a personal scale, asking “what have *I* forgotten that plays a role in shaping *my* life” (equally, what have *you* forgotten, and what is its role for you). We could, on the other hand, address a larger sense of the forgotten and ask about social or cultural forgetting, about the missed or abandoned, the overlooked or invisible in our cities, our nations, our vast, inscrutable histories. In either case, we will find a mass of details and specifics, as well as of generalities – consisting of that which it is inconvenient to remember. It can be uncovered in a search to recover that which has been deeply covered by a veil of more desired information, has been paved over in the search for faster access, has been sunk beneath the sea of forgetfulness.

Speed and priorities for immediate action, as well as a need to ascertain who is in and who is out, lend credence to the contemporary push for answers, certainties, and Truth within the global economy. But this emphasis on knowing depends on a high level of ignorance. So we turn in our meditation here to a paradigm of questioning, based on the ideas of one who claimed that his only wisdom – for which he was renowned – lay in knowing, alone it seemed among his fellow citizens, that

he did not know what he did not know. We are speaking, of course, of Socrates. We offer him as paradigm but also as question – how much may we lay claim to ignorance and how far must we act on whatever truth we see – however dimly. We will later offer a contrasting approach to understanding, one we find in Aristotle's *Politics* (1998) in which certainties about human nature are used to set up inflexible relations of power with masters 'naturally' over slaves and men over women and children.

### **The Western quest for knowledge, power, and self**

We turn to a trio of Foucauldian ideas for help in describing the situation of the forgotten and the way of the question that we address – ideas he most aptly speaks of in terms of games of truth, relations of power, and practices of the self (see for example, Foucault 2003a and 2003b). Although we use these Foucauldian concepts as tools for our specific purposes, we do not mean to make Foucault in any way responsible for our conclusions nor do we claim that he would authorize our use of these terms or our conclusions.

Beginning then with games of truth, we see that rules for producing 'truth' either broadly (within an entire society or culture) or narrowly (within a field, discipline, or given interaction) imply an emphasis first on the result to be produced and secondarily on the 'games' or methods meant to leave us in possession of it. Here we see an important distinction between product and process (the result and the activity leading to it). More dogmatic aspects of society or culture place more weight on getting the product right, i.e., on producing 'proper' conclusions, hence lending credence to a distinction between orthodoxy and heresy. Valued processes thus are those that give 'right' answers – ones that work to maintain power and status in its current forms. No one can deny the movement of processes in society, but control of that movement can be attempted in such a way as to maintain rather than transform the 'normal' state of things, a state that keeps talk of truth and relations of power as much in the same form over time as possible.

Power then resides in right answers and agreement, party affiliation, creedal tests, acts of 'faith', and in those functionaries who authorize, guard the gates, and pronounce anathemas on unbelievers. But even when the emphasis lies instead on process, such as rules of inference, moves of logical deduction, or scientific methods, the point of the process often lies solely in its product or result. Rules of inference, logical moves, and scientific methods are frequently defined wholly in terms of their adequacy in producing truth. We have no intention of implying that such rules or methods are worthless – as Foucault points out, we cannot, or at least need not, do away with games of truth.<sup>1</sup>

Moving our focus from product to process can itself be valuable in loosening dogmatism and replacing mere authority with procedures that can be refined or questioned. Here we are reminded of Marilyn Frye's comment that "The loving eye knows the independence of the other" (1983, 75). Authority that subdues and subjects the other to its gaze and 'truth'; dogmatism that closes the door of questioning and uncertainty – these do not acknowledge the independence of the other. There is no "loving eye" in the product-oriented world of absolutism. Epistemologies of ignorance help us to recall both the "willful ignorance [that] involves a cultivation of ignorance" and the "loving ignorance" of that which lies beyond our capacity for knowledge (Tuana 2006, 15). Dogmatism and authority for its own sake play upon and encourage willful ignorance and, at the same time, disparage any form of loving ignorance concerning the unknown/unknowable.

We can look at the situation with games of truth as follows: Results (alleged truths) can be questioned by turning to the processes (methods/games) that produce or produced them. Processes can be questioned by asking whether they in fact produce truths. This second step of questioning can proceed through showing that an alleged truth (one produced by the method in question) is not in fact a truth. The methods used to demonstrate this methodological failure are multiple. We can show, e.g., that the alleged truth fails to meet some broad criterion concerning what counts as a truth, or we can

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Foucault 2003, p. 37, "Thus, one escaped from the domination of truth not by playing a game that was totally different from the game of truth but by playing the same game differently or playing another game, another hand, with other trump cards." This does not mean that we should accept any given game of truth uncritically, simply that games of truth are a legitimate aspect of our social interactions.

develop or apply an alternative method for truth production, showing that the method being questioned fails to produce truths authorized by the alternative method or that it produces alleged truths the alternative method rejects.

There is also an approach that discards the production of truths, or at least certainties, as an appropriate aim. Here we see the Socrates of the *Apology* (2000) as a paradigm of a method of questioning that rejects certainties due to their function in closing the mind of the believer to further inquiry. He seems to accept a number of methodological 'truths' – for example, that courage is of great value, that one should not fear death, that one should guard one's integrity at all costs, that questioning itself lies at the heart of our common humanity, that society is most fully benefitted not by following whatever its leaders say but by calling everyone in it to account concerning what they truly value and how they choose to live. At the same time, he denies that he or anyone else has a complete grasp on final truths. We will have much more to say about Socratic wisdom and method as we proceed, but this must do for now. The aim we discover in Socrates (and many other philosophers/spiritual leaders throughout history) points to a focus not on certainties but on enhancing one's life. The problem with 'truths' is that they become indiscriminate patterns of thought and action that resist the multiplicity of moment to moment aliveness and situational variation. Hearing Socrates and the small but persistent crowd of lovers of wisdom who offer similar insights, we might uncover in ourselves a species of willful ignorance as well as a failure to love our appropriate ignorance of the unknown/unknowable, and we might see that these aspects of epistemologies of ignorance have been cultivated both by social norms and by our own fears of the unknown.

In this case, then, we employ questioning not to produce right answers and set limits to thought or community but to loosen our grasp so as to perceive more clearly and respond more adequately to whatever happens around us in the present. We do not *use* questions but rather *open to them*, allowing

a loosening of the soil, a planting of new seeds, a growth that adheres to its own rules, rules that we do not control, that are not to be managed but received in surprise and hope.

This matter of control turns us to the question of relations of power and the ways and means by which ignorance is fostered or stifled through subjectification. We follow Foucault in seeing relations of power as encompassing the vast range of ways we influence one another. My actions, intentionally or not, affect the actions of others; this is the essence of the inescapability of relations of power (and of community). Power then, again following Foucault, is not a substance or a structure or set of structures; it is not confined to domination and is not merely political or positional, in the sense of existing as or consisting of official structures of government or culture. Relations of power cover *all* human relations and interactions. The historical perspective of the West, on the other hand, tells us that power must be hoarded and fought against or for, and, again, a key aspect of that process lies in truth claims and in the control of the various levels of those games of truth used to authorize and maintain the methods, rules, and procedures needed to create and hold in place whatever certainties happen to work in conjunction with the structures of power. Ignorance is then, again, either strengthened or shunned under a reign of power that encourages us to remain ignorant of means or resistance and plays up our fears of accepting our ignorance of that which cannot be known.<sup>2</sup>

The truth must be captured, defended, and of course put into practice (as though truth and practice were distinct species that cannot mate). Attaining and keeping truth depends upon right methods, but historically it depends even more on proper access to and wielding of power. Different approaches to games of truth (that they exist merely to produce certainties or that they exist as socially constrained possibilities for thinking that must be kept fluid in order to function properly) parallel different, we might even say competing, understandings of power. On the one hand is a traditional Western view of power as domination, as absolute – what Bakhtin refers to as ‘authoritative discourse’

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<sup>2</sup> So we are provided with answers that either reduce our involvement in learning about the power and possibilities of our own lives or provide reassurance that we understand (and appropriately shun) the outsider or the different.

(1981, 342f), which functions not by persuasion since persuasion works only with at least the minimal consent of the persuaded. Authority, in this sense, works only as untouchable certainty – for Bakhtin this means that the words of authority cannot even be put in other terms but must be maintained and thus revered only in their original form. A second notion of power, presented by Foucault by means of the idea of ‘relations of power’, stands for the ongoing relationship of mutual influence in which we all always find ourselves.<sup>3</sup> Mutual influence, of course, also connects with particular games of truth, ones that do not absolutize either procedures or products of the knowledge quest. Acknowledgment of ignorance or at least possible ignorance undermines power as domination or absolute authority and consistently presents relations of power as flexible and fluid.

In this regard there are practices of the self that lean toward absolutizing claims to truth and structures of power as well as ones that balance truth claims with recognition of possible ignorance and perceive relations of power in more mutual and supple ways. Foucault’s idea of practices of the self covers a wide field of subject positions and subjectivizing processes. Our only use of it here is to suggest that the dialogical approach to questioning and the recognition of possible ignorance leads us to think of ourselves and present ourselves in relationship in ways that are less mired in endless defense of certainties than engaged in ongoing processes of increasing awareness and openness to newness and to a certain liquidity, so to speak, of relationships. Not meaning here that relationships are not valued or maintained but rather that they are both valued and maintained in process and openness more than in a defense of claims that demand constant defense and subtle or overt war.

### **The priority of the question**

So, given the paradigmatic figure of Socrates and the historical situation we have roughly outlined above, we turn to an approach championed by Socrates that cuts across the Foucauldian categories of games of truth, relations of power, and practices of self. In Plato’s reconstruction of

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<sup>3</sup> Paralleled in Bakhtin with the words “internally persuasive discourse” (1981, pp. 342f).

Socrates' defense at his trial, Socrates tells the jury of his mission from god – to question those with a reputation for wisdom (and, as a side effect, to sting the great horse of the Athenian state into virtuous action despite its lazy indifference to its own good). The possibility of wisdom, in Socrates' terms, cannot be reached by digging trenches around what we believe ourselves to know. It can only be reached by the frightening openness of free discussion with the 'barbarians' (both within and without) who fail to see the truth we find so obvious. Once we recognize the vulnerability of our claims, once we see with Socrates that the unexamined life is not worthy of human endeavor and energy, we see the priority of the question.<sup>4</sup>

We can, as we think about our thinking about things, focus on the answers we have received or the ones we wish to promote. Often this approach guides our thinking as individuals, as members of particular communities, and as human beings.<sup>5</sup> We begin with an alleged truth or, even when we begin with a question, we seek as quickly as possible to move on to the answer that dissolves the question. Socrates, among others, would have us turn this process around. Perhaps we should not only begin with questions but see them as the crucial aspect of the thinking process.<sup>6</sup> It is, after all, the question that opens the door to thinking, that thaws our frozen notions of the way the world is, that leads us to journeys of thought in which the travel functions as far more important than the arrival. Of course the occasional 'perching' (to borrow a term from William James 1890) of thought is very restful and, as we

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4 Nancy Tuana (2006) sets out a helpful taxonomy of epistemologies of ignorance in her section headings: Knowing That We Do Not Know, But Not Caring to Know; We Do Not Even Know That We Do Not Know; They Do Not Want Us to Know; Willful Ignorance; Ignorance Produced by the Construction of Epistemically Disadvantaged Identities; and Loving Ignorance. We have previously referred to some of these distinctions. Of importance here is the fact that the priority of the question plays a role in both what we fail to know and what we cannot know. Questioning opens us to seeking to know that which has been systematically withheld from us and to becoming comfortable with the truth of our epistemological limitations.

<sup>5</sup> We are tempted to refer here to our being human as a 'cosmopolitan' aspect of community, but do not wish to embroil ourselves in the heated on-going debates concerning this notion.

<sup>6</sup> We would point to Foucault (2003a), Gadamer (1989), Collingwood (2002), and Russell (1959) as representative recent thinkers who have promoted the value of questions as crucial to thinking itself.



will note subsequently, might form a launching pad for action. But it is in flight that the adventure of thought comes into its own, it is in movement that thinking attains its fullest life.

The approach taken by Socrates can be characterized as beginning with the hidden dialectic of the answers we cherish. Every statement can be seen as implying at least two questions: First, we might ask what question a certain statement answers. If, for instance, I say, “The sun is setting”, you cannot understand the meaning attached to those words unless you understand the question, whether explicit or implicit, they answer. The question I might be answering could be, “What time is it?” or “What shall we do now?” or even “What do you see?” In each case, the meaning of the words takes its orientation from the question being answered. Second, though, every statement raises a question, at least that of “Is it true?”, but often much more than that. The cultivation of ignorance, whether imposed or chosen, stands opposed to both forms of exploration – ‘truths’ that are being enforced by others or by oneself require that we not notice the flow of questions in the midst of which those claims lie. The hidden purposes of truth claims resist this kind of placement.

To see our conversations, with one another as well as with ourselves, as primarily the propounding of claims, is to view them essentially as monologues. I tell my tale and you respond with yours. My people have their stories and your people have theirs; and so on. To see conversation as substantially a flow of questions pursued produces a dialogue in the most literal sense, a movement of thinking between us rather than an attempt to hand off our truths and then turn away. A metaphor that might help here is one presented by Foucault. Spiritual practices in antiquity, he recounts, were likened to preparation for a wrestling match more than for a dance. In dancing, prescribed moves were learned that could be repeated until one attained a sense of mastery – as long as the dance is properly circumscribed according to the music and types of movement expected. But in a wrestling match one must be prepared to respond to the unexpected and thus one cannot simply follow preset moves. One must train for acuity of perception and flexibility of response (Foucault 2005). So it is with the process of

genuine conversation. It can never follow the preset moves of a catechism in which one merely memorizes the 'correct' answers with which to answer the prescribed set of questions. Genuine conversation follows the flow of those questions that come up as one moves further and further from the known. Epistemologies of ignorance remind us of the value of comfort with the unknown and alongside that comfort a sharply defined sense of who benefits from ignorance that has potentially been imposed upon us by those who use our lack of knowledge to their advantage.

An education, for instance, that emphasizes memorized answers leaves one with a comfortable sense of knowledge, even of certainty. Life, however, throws us questions at an unprecedented rate and from unexpected angles. In that case, a recognition of ignorance that sets the frame for discovery and invention fits the best. As Socrates tells us, those who believe they know because they are satisfied with simplistic answers fail the test of wisdom. Only those, like Socrates himself, who accept their ignorance play well at life's game of uncertainty.

### **Socrates as paradigm of ignorance**

In the *Apology* Socrates details the charges that have been brought against him (Plato 2000); his offense being that of attempting to point out fallacies in the thinking of those with whom he came into contact through a probing question-and-answer model that the Athenian political leaders deemed threatening. In his claim that artisans and poets alike also considered themselves wise in aspects other than their respective vocations, he concluded after questioning them that they lacked knowledge about such matters and it would be more advantageous to be as he saw himself – having neither their wisdom nor their ignorance. For Socrates, then, the wise individual is the one who knows he doesn't know. This *Socratic irony* serves as a paradigm of ignorance through which we might more carefully and thoughtfully consider our claims in the quest to come closer to truth – to break through those unrepentant certainties to which we so carefully cling. The advantages of having access to such a paradigm would seem endless. Allowing questions to arise based on our prior held beliefs and claims

affords a thought process that, if pursued with diligence, forces us to reassess our thinking in light of alternative perspectives brought about through questioning the various parts of our claims and beliefs to highlight fallacies that we might not otherwise become aware of. This would seem, then, to lead us closer and closer to truth as we continue to question our claims as they continue to evolve by means of the question-and-answer process itself.

This paradigm can be useful to individuals as they engage in questioning themselves, allowing those unrepentant certainties to break open to expose subsequent questions that in turn inform the formulation of conclusions that fuel further questions. This ongoing process alerts the individual to remain ever open to questioning that serves to further facilitate an articulation of thought and belief. This paradigm of ignorance can be very effective in classroom practice as the teacher actively engages her/his students in questions alternately posed with their answers. As students become more and more familiar with the Socratic Method, they will potentially become increasingly adept at the practice and engage their fellow students in the process. Such a practice then leads students to the twin ideas of (1) discovering where ignorance has been imposed or taken on that puts them at a disadvantage and (2) becoming increasingly at ease with not having answers to every question.

So what could be disadvantageous about this paradigm of ignorance? For what could be a more efficient way to actively pursue truth than to keep open the line of questioning? Let us take up for a moment the subject of questioning more closely. That which would ostensibly lead us to particular conclusions via a line of logical reasoning that the Socratic Method entails also has the capacity to discard anything that obstructs this line of reasoning. The danger here lies in the fact that the discarded can have the potential to offer up a space for resistance that informs critical social practice. In the standards driven world of education, specifically, such legislation as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) might be justified as necessary if taken up in a debate that attempts to secure a legitimation of a system

of quantifiable rewards and punishments in an effort to improve student performance in selected subjects with selected criteria.

What gets left out, however, is the plight of those students whose lived situations and experiences do not lend themselves to improvement through this line of reasoning. Here the emphasis on standards and test scores is so great and so omnipresent that it can leave teachers, students, and parents feeling suffocated – and in the case of many students and parents, with a lack of awareness of the cause of such feelings – and powerless to actively resist in any productive way. Now, in his defense, so to speak, we can hardly claim that Socrates would somehow lead an individual of today to believe that the NCLB is somehow justified in its current incarnation. The point here, however, is that when we become so involved in trying to pursue the ‘truth’ for our own ends, it is often possible to argue ‘logically’ for those ends. In doing so, we forget, ignore, and/or delete those spaces that are lying below the logic and at the heart of critical social practice. Returning to the NCLB, who is going to allow those spaces to rise to the top so that marginalized groups of students can be served in ways that offer them optimal opportunities? How can spaces be opened up for teachers to engage in the questioning that affords teachers and students the opportunity to *be* and *feel* empowered to effect change in their own lives? If our admitted ignorance leads us to accept the status quo (as in the case of the standards-driven curriculum in U.S. public schools) we make a mockery of the Socratic approach to wisdom, since Socrates used his questioning to undermine socially accepted ideas as a means to move his fellow Athenians outside their shared certainties toward a more just and wise way of life. Ignorance, in other words, can be cited as a reason for inaction,<sup>7</sup> and we need to recognize the possibility that certain approaches to admitting ignorance might aid the oppressor if we are to maintain critical practice grounded in and alongside of our recognition of what we do not know. As noted earlier, we must

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<sup>7</sup> We think here of those who realize they don’t understand all the workings of local, national, or global politics and thus go along with forms of oppression (racism, sexism, and so on) and with programs such as NCLB because they have no clear idea how to organize or act in resistance.

distinguish between two ideas in applying an epistemology of ignorance to engaging in critical practice: first, ignorance might be forced upon one by certain relations of power that gain from our lack of knowledge or by ourselves, when we believe that we gain from not knowing something; second, in at least some areas of life knowledge lies beyond our abilities and our ignorance can fruitfully be embraced. In both areas questioning can help develop our understanding, and in both areas we need to be less quick than we might want to be in determining what we can and cannot know.

Socrates then provides a paradigm not only in terms of individual intellectual endeavor but, as we have just suggested, in terms of social action and policy. We cannot open spaces for the questioning that empowers without placing questioning in a central position within our human endeavors, whether in education, as just suggested, or in politics, communal resistance, or individual experience. The heart of critical social practice remains tied to the Socratic paradigm of the centrality of the question.

### **Contesting the Socratic notion of ignorance**

We are ready now to contest what we have so far valorized – the Socratic ignorance that problematizes the value of unquestioned certainties. There is no question that acknowledged ignorance holds great value when opposed to rigid categories of knowledge; as discussed in the last section, knowing when and what we do not know plays a crucial role in critical practice and in resistance to oppression whether our ignorance is forced upon us so that we need to overcome it or unavoidable so that we need to accept it. As emphasized earlier, questions surround our every claim, and conversation that presents itself as monologue fails to meet its own standard of meaning. Dialogue stands as a primary function of human interaction whether with oneself, with others, or with life itself. What those who would engage in critical practice must contest, however, lies in the Platonic Socrates whose vision of truth might block levels of actionable critique as discussed in regard to NCLB, for example. For the sake of simplicity, we might divide understandings of Socrates along the following lines: First is the Socrates of the *Apology*, in its most obvious reading, who values questions over answers and unveils his

view of human wisdom as worthless because most of it falls prey to its own image-making. (For example, the 'wise' people of Athens questioned by Socrates seem much more concerned about maintaining the public belief in their wisdom than about learning anything and thus becoming wiser.) We find a second vision of Socrates as one who questions the wisdom of his peers primarily on the basis of a greater wisdom of his own. This outlook appears at least in part in the *Republic* (Plato, 1991) where the story of the cave represents Socratic wisdom as being based in a divine vision of the truth that the ignorant simply lack. The pretense of wisdom found in the Athenian 'wise' people is likened to those who mistake shadows for reality.

Even if we deny that in the second view Plato reflects the historic Socrates, the Socrates of the *Apology* seems intent on seeking truth, in much the manner of those who invoke epistemologies of ignorance to chart a path through the muddied waters of societal 'truths' that often simply serve the powerful. Although Socrates claims that human wisdom is worthless, he makes some claims that sound very much like claims to knowledge such as that (1) he speaks the truth in contrast to the lies of his accusers, (2) he knows the truth about his lack of wisdom, (3) there are certain truths about how one ought to live and die, and (4) Athens benefits from his questioning of its citizens. It also seems that he raises questions as though there are truths to be found that his 'victims' simply have not yet found. This is particularly apparent in certain other Platonic dialogues such as the *Meno* where Socrates questions Meno about the correct definition of virtue (Plato 1924).<sup>8</sup> There seems in these accounts to be no question as to whether there is a truth about the essence of virtue, the question lies in whether they have yet found that truth. Even the ending of the *Meno*, aporetic as it is, suggests continuing the quest the next day, presumably in the hope that tomorrow the truth about virtue might be found.

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<sup>8</sup> We acknowledge that the *Meno* provides us with what is likely to be Plato's later view of Socrates that is not to be confused with the earlier view found in the *Apology*. Nevertheless the view found in Socrates' questioning of Meno corresponds in some ways with the questioning in the *Apology* of the alleged wisdom of the leaders, poets, and artisans of Athens.

We would like then to offer the following question about Socratic wisdom/ignorance, as suggested above: Does Socrates in the end value his famed ignorance or does he settle for ignorance while wishing always to replace questions with answers, ignorance with knowledge, 'worthless' human wisdom with the genuine wisdom of the gods? Let's suppose that the latter is the case. Then Socratic ignorance and the perpetual questioning that it embraces stand not as paradigmatic but as a temporary expedient on the (admittedly long and troubling) road to Truth. The following alternatives stand out, at this important juncture on this path: On the one hand, questions have primary value and can never be set aside. They are not temporary, to be left behind as soon as possible, but offer us the highest intellectual and practical value. On the other hand, answers are always the point. We settle for questions only until we turn them into answers, only until we replace them and finally put them to rest by coming to the truth they push us to seek. Socrates, and the whole intellectual tradition of the West, can be called as witnesses on either side of this duality.

One worst case scenario in relation to what Socrates offers us lies in the suggestion that even in the case of thinking of him as the ancestor of a view that places questions first we find in him a privileging of the abstract and theoretical over the practical and workable ideas we need for social liberation and personal freedom. The problematic point here is that either of the alternatives above might end up placing practice outside the range of real interest. Whether, in other words, one sees questions as primary, but essentially theoretical, or one see purely conceptual answers as primary, one can be left without any practical grasp of ways to form, reform, or transform society. When Socrates calls the 'wise' to account, he attacks their ability to answer definitional questions, to provide proper conceptualizations, to offer the essence, in words, of those ideas he has asked them to address. He further suggests, quite directly, that what aids Athens, his ultimate value to his society, lies in his holding them accountable for their ideas.

### **Socratic not-knowing and Aristotelian politics**

Now let us place Socratic ignorance up against a rival notion, that of Aristotelian understanding of human nature and society. To begin with we admit that we intend to be less than fair to Aristotle, whose thinking was wide-ranging and of immense importance in Western intellectual history. It is easy to pick on such a figure and to make points at his expense that no one could make were Aristotle here to respond. We use Aristotle in our own teaching, both explicitly (JGK) and implicitly (DBK) – to make use of Western thought at all places us in a debt to Aristotle, and despite its flaws we make use of the categories and logic of Western thought as part of any attempt to work with the intellectual, affective, and pedagogical resources of our society. Having made our confession, we can proceed to the attack.

Aristotle presents us with a ‘science’ of society and self – recognizing as he does so that the level of precision possible in this arena is far below that in mathematics or some other sciences. Nevertheless he explains the nature of human happiness, the best life, and the best society – both in terms of logical and attainable possibility. The highest good for human beings, called happiness or a satisfying life (*eudaimonia*), is to be found most fully in completing the highest human capacity, the capacity to reason or think (to engage in dialogue [*logos*] inner and outer<sup>9</sup>), i.e., it is found in *theoria*, usually translated ‘contemplation’. A secondary approach to the highest good lies in political involvement for the sake of creating and maintaining a good society. The best life is a life of intellectual and practical virtues lived in a society with a successful constitution. The highest human life is only possible for certain kinds of individuals; slaves, women, barbarians, and children can engage in a limited kind of virtuous behavior but complete virtue and therefore a fully happy life requires a full measure of human capacities – the ability to reason and the ability to carry out one’s reasoning – which individuals on the preceding list lack (though male children of free and wealthy citizens carry within them the possibility of a good life through having the potential to acquire these basic human capacities).

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<sup>9</sup> Friendship appears to be of substantial importance for Aristotle, not only in general and as an important aspect of virtue but also in relation to fulfilling the highest human function of contemplation.



Aristotle soundly renounces Plato's perfect society (found in the *Republic*), yet describes his own possibilities of social perfection in the *Politics*. We must recognize that Aristotle sees human society as both perfectible, within certain limits, and as necessarily imperfect, due to various antagonisms and struggles that naturally reside in any actual community. There are, for example, the natural antipathies held by the rich for the poor (and the poor for the rich) as well as by both of these for the group in the middle. It is further the case that various social and vocational groups tend to participate in a form of internal warfare and that the vicious and virtuous form a natural dichotomy. Due to these factors and to aspects of history, geography, choice, and other contextual features of human community, any group, although made up of human beings who are naturally political, cannot complete a perfect *polis*. The best we can do is form a proper society, based on a balance of factors and antagonisms that has the greatest potential for a satisfying, lasting 'union'. Such a proper union can only be attained when those who live within it each take an appropriate place in the whole. That, further, requires that the naturally superior and the naturally inferior be correctly distinguished and fulfill suitable roles.

Out of Aristotle's view (which, Aristotle might be surprised to find us suggest, seems remarkably similar to that of Plato<sup>10</sup>) we then get the common view of the West, in which everyone has an assigned role that must be rightly lived in order to produce a good society. Whether or not this ideal would in fact work, and neither utopian social experiments nor any known *polis* has been able to demonstrate its validity, its danger lies in the unthinking acceptance of assigned roles – even ones we assign ourselves.<sup>11</sup> Bluntly and briefly put, assigned roles make the players of those roles conceptual objects rather than persons. We might agree with Kant, for instance, that playing an assigned role (being a *means* rather than an *end* on occasion) holds no danger given our free acceptance of the role and its being a role that causes no damage to oneself or others. Even so, however, the playing of roles endangers our individual

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<sup>10</sup> Of course there are significant differences between their views, which we do not mean to ignore. We point here only to the way in which the ultimate society gets portrayed by both thinkers as involving placing each individual in her/his 'proper' role that cannot be evaded or denied at pain of loss to the functional whole.

<sup>11</sup> This of course plays directly into various historic and current epistemologies of ignorance.

multiplicity and requires the (at least temporary) relinquishment of questioning and resistance – either of which might be given up briefly but both of which must be kept available if we are not to lose what makes us human and what makes a living community possible.

What makes society work, in the end, in the common view of Plato, Aristotle, and the West seems to be the subjection of ‘natural’ inferiors by masters, men, and the virtuous rich. Even granted that the West has in recent decades placed some of this subjection under scrutiny, it still forms a core value of the social arrangements that make possible the style of life looked at as a natural right and both exported and understood as a key human value by the most powerful nations (and corporations) of the Western tradition. As a simple but central example, without the poverty of the workforce (slaves, women, subsistence-level workers) not only the rich but whatever middle class remains as well as the relatively impoverished members of ‘developed’ countries could not acquire the goods and have available the services that they have come to expect and require – as part of a good life.<sup>12</sup>

We turn to Socrates – admittedly poor and carrying a dangerous value to his society – for a response to the Aristotelian “good life” and parallel “good society.” We would maintain that there is much agreement between Socrates and Aristotle (and between both of them and Plato) about the crucial significance of virtue in one’s life, about the necessary connections between self and society, and about the intimate coincidence of personal goodness and a good life.<sup>13</sup> What Socrates offers in response to the controlled, indexed, tagged, and ordered life of a society that holds everyone in place lies

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<sup>12</sup> We would like to note here recent television commercials by a big box chain store extolling its value for providing a good life at a reasonable price – the actors in these fictions appearing as members of middle class families able to engage in enjoyable pastimes through saving money at the stores in question – stores that frequently have been criticized for their treatment of workers and their encouragement of sweatshop production conditions.

<sup>13</sup> Further, the ‘big three’ ancient thinkers (Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle) all denounce in various ways those forms of ignorance that restrict, taint, or destroy a good society. Socrates denounces the ‘wisdom’ of those who lead society and pass off their ignorance as truth; Plato (in the *Republic*) holds that society must be ruled by philosophers (genuine ‘lovers of wisdom’), and Aristotle points out the need for proper enculturation so that one sees virtue for what it is and does not fall prey to the ignorant aims of those who value pleasure or political honors over virtue.

primarily in his unwillingness to accept society's given order as its correct one. The priority of the question, we maintain, undermines the authorized and 'proper' control of persons under any reign of benevolent subjection. It offers instead wonder, uncertainty, and movement that always overflow the banks of certainty, that never cease to bring enforced order and harmony, however wise its proponents proclaim themselves to be, under profound and incessant attack, not because the questioners know better but because no one does.

### **The virtues of epistemic poverty**

Our concluding point, then, relies on a value we have tried to question: epistemic poverty,<sup>14</sup> a fundamental recognition of our individual and communal lack of knowledge 'goods', both constitutes a virtue and requires a set of virtues without which we wallow in false convictions about our access to truth. The most significant virtue needed to live out this voluntary poverty lies in placing a priority on questions rather than answers, on recognizing the centrality of ignorance not principally as a lack but as the space required in order to begin to move. We take Socrates as our paradigm here, without apology but noting that one possible Socratic approach can obscure what we must instead bring into the foreground, the need for ignorance not to paralyze but to galvanize.<sup>15</sup> When ignorance becomes an excuse for immobility, we lose the impetus that the priority of the question supplies, i.e., the drive for resistance.

The value of the virtues of epistemic poverty become especially important as we seek to break the hegemony of polemic certainties, such as the ones surrounding the so-called No Child Left Behind legislation. Can no child be left behind? Can we actualize education that optimizes every person's

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<sup>14</sup> A term we employ for the Socratic questioning we have been describing. It relates both to questioning forms of assigned ignorance and to allowing a judicious love of ignorance in relation to the unknown/unknowable.

<sup>15</sup> Ignorance, in other words, becomes the spark for becoming. It is the recognition that knowledge is always lacking and to know is a verb and sets in motion the terms for ignorance, what must always be understood as unintelligible but also a force in our knowing.

possibilities?<sup>16</sup> Can we, for example, as suggested by Marcuse (1991), so supply everyone within our larger society (perhaps even at the level of planetarity<sup>17</sup>) with sufficient goods that we then, each and all, turn our released energies toward artistic (or similar) endeavors that fulfill our humanity, rather than embracing a corporate vision of merely becoming better and better consumers.

This leads us then back to the door through which we entered this discussion. What is left out and forgotten in our everyday and our political understandings? Our everyday particular knowing of our ignorance – that we do not know all that we might (or even all that we believe we do) and that the hidden presence of the other in our conversations and our world calls *us* into question and points to the priority of the question not only as a heuristic device or as a clever means for keeping hidden our aggressive agendas but as a living process for proclaiming the uncertainty we ought to feel in the fluid movement of thought, dialogue, and life.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> We think here, though not exclusively, of Dewey's suggestion that equality requires equal opportunity to develop and that any legitimate form of democracy requires that form of equality (1937).

<sup>17</sup> We draw this term and at least some of its conceptual framework from Spivak 2003, also Pinar 2007 and, interestingly, Teilhard 1978.

<sup>18</sup> Our sincere thanks and deep appreciation for the extremely useful critical comments on an earlier draft by the editors of this volume and by Erik in particular.

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