

**Is Socrates Dead? Can Socratic Teachers in  
Higher Education Remain Alive?**

By

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**Abstract**

The contentions of this paper are quite simple: Socrates has long been dead. Tragically, the teacher in higher education who attempts to emulate him is unlikely to remain alive. Moreover, there are a number of poisonous elements within the higher education environment that are potentially lethal to the Socratic teacher of today. Citations from Apology, Crito, Ion, Meno, Phaedo, Symposium, and The Republic support the above contentions.

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The contentions of this paper are quite simple. Yes, Socrates has long been dead. Tragically, the teacher in higher education who attempts to emulate him is unlikely to remain alive. Moreover, there are a number of poisonous elements within the higher education environment that are potentially lethal to the Socratic teacher of today.

**Seeking the Truth**

Socrates, as described by Plato, is renowned as a teacher seeking the truth and virtue through whatever vehicle presented itself. For example in Meno (p.30), Socrates states "I have been looking for one virtue and found a whole swarm of virtues...Do you say there are many different kinds of bees?" However, a teacher's seeking the truth in the modern academic world is largely irrelevant. For example, this characteristic rarely, if ever, appears as a criterion on faculty self-evaluations and evaluations. Moreover, the residua of academic fads,

shibboleths, and comical subterfuges such as postmodernism, social construction, deconstruction, subjugating discourses, and the close reading have badly damaged the notion of truth's ontological validity--as a concept and as a goal. The teacher who professes to seek the truth is tolerated only as aberration, anachronism, comedian, or psychiatrically challenged. More often the Socratic teacher is not tolerated without the espousal of a truth that there is no truth.

**Daring to Speak the Truth**

Socrates taught at a time of crisis for his political state--viz., Athens. Military, political, social, cultural, economic, and psychological challenges were soon to exhaust the Athenian democracy and to lead to an eclipse of a here to fore golden era. Yet through the crisis, Socrates persisted in speaking the truth "like the sound of the flute in the ears of the mystic" (Crito, p.62)--even truth about untruth--regardless of popularity, political correctness, and threats to toe the

political line or be silent. In the modern academic environment, a teacher following Socrates might not face the hemlock but could well face innuendo, loyalty oaths, investigation, set-ups to fail, the "dirty tricks" of academicians, contractual termination, and legal suits.

#### **Daring to Speak the Truth about the Truth**

Socrates maintained that telling the truth is not always essential to justice. On the contrary, he maintained that, in a well-ordered society, it is necessary to tell certain untruths to children and adults. As he stated in The Republic (p. 319), "Our rulers will find a considerable dose of falsehood and deceit necessary for the good of their subjects." In the modern academic environment, a teacher promulgating such an orientation might face the ire of a board of trustees and suffer mass-media characterization as the "professor who teaches the young how to lie." This notwithstanding the mass of academic research from the social sciences and the humanities supporting the

contention that to lie--to oneself and others--is as human as breathing.

#### **Publications**

Socrates had no publications. His forte was the dialogue of the moment, the intoxication of spontaneous conceptual engagement, the bittersweet spice of dialectic--even if he did "in obedience to the dream...compose a few verses before I departed" and "take some fables of Aesop...and turned them into verse" (Phaedo, p.72) for his own pleasure and edification. A teacher in the modern academic world who would attempt to follow this route of "master teacher" to academic tenure would be an unlikely success--even in universities professing to be so-called teaching schools. Without scholarly productivity and university service the Socratic teacher at best might be kept on with the lowly status of lecturer.

#### **Validation by One's Peers**

Socrates had a lively following of students. In fact, he was viewed as a peerless teacher by these students and by himself. As Socrates says of

Chaerephon saying of Socrates, "The Pythian prophetess answered that there was no man wiser" (Apology, p. 10). In this context, being peerless is a decided difficulty. Validation is not possible because there are no peers to perform the validating function. Plaudits from students and the like-minded of faculty become quickly cheapened as preaching within the choir, as ritualistic bizzarrities within a cult. Other choirs and other cults must pass judgment. Yet these were jealous of Socrates. In fact, many despised him. Thus, a teacher following Socrates is doubly doomed. The reification of external validation in the modern academic world ensures that a teacher truly without peers does not fit into the process of validation. The combinations of adversarial, corrupt, and solipsistic dynamics--as well as an ethnocentricity arising from the ethnos of academia--would surely impede the Socratic teacher's success.

#### **Validation by One's Students**

Socrates' students were in awe of him. For example, Phaedo recounts the death

of Socrates by stating that "I had a singular feeling at being in his company" (Phaedo, p. 68). Socrates was extremely influential in their lives. Words such as *charismatic* and *mesmerizing* seem to apply to him. But beyond this, he was accused of what today we would call the remaking of minds, personality restructuring, the capturing of souls. In the modern academic environment, the Socratic teacher would be accused of having too-close, unhealthy relationships with students. The university would not long tolerate legal suits and the lamentations of parents and their well-paid cult deprogrammers before the Socratic teacher would be out the door.

#### **Social Relationships with Students**

Socrates ate, drank, and had sex with his students. For example, Apollodorus recounts "the speeches in praise of love which were delivered by Socrates, Alcibiades, and others at Agathon's supper" (Symposium, p. 165). Alcibiades complains of Socrates "always lying in wait for me, , and always, as his way is, coming out

at all sorts of places" (Symposium, p. 220) and brags as to Socrates being able to "drink any quantity of wine and be not at all drunk" (Symposium, p. 221). Socrates complains to Agathon that Alcibiades "goes wild with envy and jealousy, and not only abuses me but can hardly keep his hands off me" (Symposium, p. 220). Intellectual unequals, they shared the social pleasures and vices bonded with the centripetal forces of huge power imbalances. In the modern academic environment so politicized with discrimination, harassment, and exploitation issues, many combinations of such behaviors would be academically suicidal--if exposed. On the other hand, some combinations of such pleasures and vices at some academic venues may further the career of teacher and/or student--but calibrating the differences between a pilgrim's progress and an Armageddon-like disaster in an ever-changing political, social, cultural, and psychological space might too closely resemble Russian roulette.

### **Answering Questions with Questions**

A hallmark of the so-called Socratic method is answering a question or commenting on answers with questions. For example, when Ion asks "And what is there that Homer speaks about which I don't know?" Socrates answers "Why does not Homer speak often enough about arts and crafts?" (Ion, p. 21). Avatars of the method cite its induction of creative, insightful, and cogent thought processes as its *raison d'etre* as well as its *telos*. In the modern academic environment a teacher renowned for questioning techniques may face letters from irate parents wondering why their hard-earned tuition dollars don't buy "real answers," complaints from students who just want to know what will be on the quiz or test, and poor evaluations and even termination notices from tuition-sensitive administrators. Repeating Socrates' dictum that in the last analysis philosophy is but knowledge of ignorance may not suffice as damage control. Neither would be the rejoinder that Socratic method is not just questioning but often

listening wordlessly and at times letting students engage in discourse without the teacher present at all. To this last point, silence would not be golden.

### **The Disadvantaged**

Socratic dialogues involve only the political elite. Socrates at least implicitly tolerated--if not supported--the notion that knowledge as political power belonged only to the elite and that most people were of a lower intellectual and moral caliber. As Socrates says to Meno, "...man's virtue is to manage public affairs well, and woman's to manage a home..." (Meno, p. 31). Also, "...the first thing will be to establish a censorship of the writers of fiction" (The Republic, p. 254). In the modern academic environment there already is a pathway surfaced with the destroyed careers--if not corpses--of those who have dared posit that there are class, ethnic, and racial differences in intellect and morality. The Socratic teacher would attract the frenzied hordes of the politically correct baying for blood. As well, the Socratic teacher's presence would place public funding

for university programs in grave danger.

### **Advocating Communism**

Although bearing views quite different from Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, their acolytes, and the radical chic, Socrates noted that very few people were able to judge how to best use and experience their assets--be it personal property or family members. A logical consequence of this observation according to Plato's descriptions of Socratic thought is that a pure sort of communism--for personal property, women, and children--would constitute an optimal political state. As Socrates states, "A bad soul needs rule and care badly" (The Republic, p. 154). Also, "Man is a prisoner who has no right to open the door and run away" (Phaedo, p. 73). In the modern academic environment--even in the aftermath of the Cold War--such advocacy would raise a red flag.

### **Conclusion**

Although homage to Socrates as a guidon of outstanding teaching is still prevalent--enough to

form the theme of this very interesting symposium sponsored by The College of Career Education of Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University's Extended Campus--Plato's description of Socrates renders this homage somewhat paradoxical in the modern academic environment. Is this a tribute to Socrates' "extraordinary power of sustaining fatigue" and "(h)is endurance (being) simply marvellous" (Symposium, p. 229)? Or a violation of Socrates' dictum that "(t)he same thing clearly cannot act or be acted upon in the same part or in relation to the same thing at the same time, in contrary ways" (The Republic, p. 288)?



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