

Socratic Style of Teaching (An Analysis of Dialectical Method)

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Abstract

Socrates is supposed to be the great teacher of Ancient Greece. He is the teacher of the great philosopher Plato, and the grand teacher of Aristotle. In this regard he is supposed to be the grand grand teacher of Alexander the great. His method of teaching is called Dialectical Method – teaching with interaction and dialogue. This dialogue is unique in many respects. This is not a question answer sort of dialogue. In this dialogue the first statement of the participant is considered a thesis and Socrates is supposed to find the internal contradiction of it. The pragmatic value of the Dialectical Method has been discussed in this article and the limitations of the Socratic Method have been highlighted also. The interactive Method of Socrates can be used in many subjects of the students of different grades. The limitations and delimitations of the Method have also been discussed. In this article, it has been attempted to elaborate and analyze the teaching method of Socrates with all its pre-suppositions and Epistemological character.

Keywords: Socratic Method, Dialectical Method, Knowledge, Teaching, Virtue.

Introduction

Generally (and globally) Greek Philosophy is divided into three parts. This distinction is Chronological and also Thematic in nature. Early Greek Philosophy is the area in which all the early philosophers before Socrates are included. Greco-Roman tradition seems proud of the three philosophers – Socrates, Plato and Aristotle and considers them as the best philosophers of Greek period (Bambrough, 2013). After Aristotle the Philosophy of Greece is called Later Greek Philosophy. If Early Greek philosophy is Cosmological in nature and the later Greek period seems very much concerned with the question of human salvation, the Prime era of Greek philosophy (from Socrates to Aristotle) seems much concerned with the questions of ethics, human existence and the problems of human knowledge (Perdue, 2014). Socrates never wrote anything (Russell, 1971). We know him by the writings of his students especially Plato (Hamilton & Cairns, 1985). Socrates never wrote about teaching also but he invented his own style of teaching and this method is called Dialectical Method in Philosophy (George, 2015).

In Socratic style of teaching we hardly find any fixed content. He was much concerned with the correction of the positive statement or its criticism and the validity of the argument (Woolf & Adamson, 2021). Anything can be a part and parcel of his teaching. He had been busy in correcting the statements of Politicians, Poets, Sculpturers, Intellectuals and especially the Teachers. He was against the commercial nature of the teachings of Sophists and the upholder of a good moral and intellectual life of individuals and society (Stace, 2010).

Socrates talked about the basic and fundamental ideas of knowledge, ethics, morality, love, friendship, teaching, learning and social harmony.

Research Objectives

The research objectives of this article are as follows:

1. This study is an endeavor to clarify the theoretical basis of Socratic style of teaching with all its pre-suppositions and limitations.
2. This study aims to explain the pragmatic value of Dialectical Method.
3. This study aims to highlight the activity based education with its interactive nature.
4. To incorporate Socratic Method in modern educational system theoretically and practically.
5. To highlight the relevance of Socratic Method in the contemporary educational system.

Method

Socratic Method starts with simple questions which are very natural apparently. For example the question of Education – What is teaching? What is Knowledge? What are Concepts? How do we form Concepts? What is Ethics or Morality etc?

Socrates asked these questions of fundamental nature to the citizens of Greece. The style or the Method (usually) goes like that.

Socrates - What is Education?

Another person - Education is the process of learning and sharing.

Socrates – What do you mean by learning and sharing etc?

In this way Socrates asked again and again the fundamental concepts and tried to reach at some basic and fundamental simple ideas. The very first statement is supposed to be a thesis (Education is the learning and sharing of the fundamental concept) and the second one is called the Anti-thesis. If the persons involved in the dialogue reach at an agreement, it is called synthesis. Here the question arises why Socrates asked these types of ‘What’ questions repeatedly and what were the expected results?

The Pre-Supposition

The pre-supposition behind asking basic questions again and again is to believe in the innate ideas (Audi, 1998). In the Philosophical Epistemology there have been two rival schools one is called Rationalism and the second is called Empiricism. According to Rationalist school Man is born with simple innate ideas. We cannot invent knowledge, we only discover. We discover and re-discover (Miller, 1983) what we have already in us with self-introspection and self-execution (Socrates, Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Lebanese and Hegel are the famous upholders of this school). According to Empiricist school Man is born blind like *Tabula Rasa* (blank slate) (Loke, Barkley and Hume are the big upholders of this school). Being a Rationalist, Socrates believed in innate or latent ideas. For him too, Human knowledge is a discovery and

not an invention. We cannot invent something new interlay. With this pre-supposition Socrates asked What questions again and again to different members of Greek society. What is Love, what is Friendship, what is teaching, what is Education and what is Ethics or Morality etc? Socrates and Plato were of the opinion that human beings understood the reality of different phenomena through an intellectual intuition (Miller, 1983). Man can discover many things through this intellectual intuition and can form definitions which are basically the verbal forms of the concepts. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle all are interested in the phenomenon of defining things (Flew, 1989). According to them the definitions of things are essence of them in oral form. Socrates used to take one simple statement of what category and discussed it thoroughly. Karl Popper is of the opinion that the whole process of defining things is unnecessary and unscientific in many ways (Popper, 1992). Popper does not deny the existence of some sort of innate ideas or an intellectual intuition but he does not want to give them an ultimate status in Epistemology. According to him intellectual intuition can be a great source of the production of human knowledge but it can also be a great source of confusion and mislead (Popper, 1992).

What, Why and How

The What questions are the part and parcel of Rationalist school and its belief in innate ideas on one hand and an intellectual intuition on the other. The best example for explaining these kinds of questions is the phenomenon of Mathematics. From Aristotle to John Stuart Mill there have been many philosophers who tried to prove that mathematics is also derived from the external and material world or tried to prove that number is an essential quality of material things. These point of views have not been popular among mathematicians and the philosophers of mathematics (Monk, 2016, 9:22). Mathematics is abstract, rational, and intuitive and it seems not to be derived from external world (Mendelsohn, 2005). Why questions basically belong to Philosophical Metaphysics – Why we are here in this universe? Why life becomes so hard or cruel sometimes? And why everything is in a state of flux in this world (Ewing, 2012)? How questions belong to the area of Physical Sciences. How the birds fly, how fish live in the water, how matter changes itself to energy? Etc. Much influenced by his grand teacher (Socrates) Aristotle gave a concept of Final Cause (Russell, 1971, p.175). Final Cause is actually the rational justification of any existence. It is the aim, purpose or end towards everything is heading according to Aristotle. The questions of Socrates are very important. We cannot deny the existence of innate ideas and our capacity to discover or re-discover them through introspection but pure Sciences (Physical Sciences) cannot be developed in this way. We can take an example. To explain the Final Causes of different organs of the body is easy (comparatively) but to know the final cause of a complete human being is difficult. On the other hand to know the final cause of heart, lungs or kidney is not very fruitful as compare to understand the structure and functions of them. To know the structure and function of human heart is to dissect it and try to understand the inner structure and function. In other words we can say that the questions raised by Socrates and the phenomenon of definitions are important in Social Sciences and Mathematics but not in the sphere of Natural or Physical Sciences (Physics, Chemistry, Biology). What and Why questions seem Speculative, Theoretical and Philosophical while How questions seem Scientific and Testable. But again here arises an important question that can theory be authentic without practice or can practice be productive and fruitful without a sound theory behind?

Socratic Method in Social Sciences

In the present World Socratic Method can be used in teaching the subjects of Social Sciences like History, Political Science, Anthropology, Sociology etc. The nature of these subjects demands a concept clarification in order to understand the fundamental concepts behind them. Socratic Method can easily be used in the teaching of Philosophy, Psychology and Theoretical Physics etc. Apparently this method is repetitive and the questions seem the same but this repetition is necessary and useful because old questions can be the sources of new answers. The nature of the Philosophical questions are different from the questions of Physical Sciences but it should be remembered that every physical Science has also a strong theoretical aspect. Old and Fundamental questions being asked in a new environment and atmosphere can

bring new and innovative answers and assumptions with them. The problem with Socratic Method is that apparently it lacks a fixed syllabi (Magee, 2001). Anything can be a part and parcel of the Philosophical Method of Socrates. This Method cannot have a specific syllabus because it is basically concerned with the fundamental questions related to any syllabi.

Socratic Method in Physical Sciences

Physics, Chemistry and Biology are supposed to be testable. The Customary point of view about Science has been that Science starts with observation and experience and the statements of Science can be verifiable. Karl Popper challenged this traditional view of Science and claimed that no Human Knowledge can be produced or developed by mere observation and experience (Popper, 1972). Like other forms of learning in Science too one has to have an assumption, a guess or a creative idea to have a start (Popper, 1987, p.105). He is also of the opinion that scientific statements should be falsifiable instead of being verifiable (Churchland, 1975). In simple words the Philosophy of Science of Popper highlights the priority of theory over practice. In this way the importance of the Dialectical Method of Socrates increases. From the point of view of Popper we can infer that every human knowledge or form of learning starts with a theoretical background in the form of a creative conjecture or guess. Now the question arises – where does this creative idea come from? Is it from God or from Nature or from a Holy Spirit etc. or it is from Matter, energy and the outer and external world?

Socrates has never been interested in the above mentioned Metaphysical questions (Satce, 2010). He had been more interested in the questions of Ethics and Morality rather Metaphysics. Like Sadharat, Socrates was much more interested in Man than God. The creative idea in the Dialectical Method of Socrates comes from dialogue and interaction. Critical as well as Creative tendencies developed through the dialogue and the interaction among different people help clarify the concepts on one hand and can be helpful in order to probe a creative idea.

The Pragmatic Value of Socratic Method

Socratic Method can appropriately be used in classroom activities. It is about discussion, conversation and interaction. It could be quite interesting if the participants in a group discussion or a dialogue of two or three persons are intelligent. This method can be used to develop the conversational and argumentative skills of the students of different age groups. This method can help clarify the concepts of different forms of learning. Dialectical Method emphasizes the importance of the anti-thesis of any statement. The philosophy behind this method is to understand that every statement has inherently an anti-thesis of it. Every single statement can have an anti-thesis of it for example if we have a start with the questions like what is Art, what is Science, or what is History etc. The positive replies of these questions can have many anti-these, contradictions, contradiction in terms, and the problems of definitions etc. According to Karl Popper the famous philosopher of 20th Century “The rational discussion between two persons of different orientation is a rare thing but at least one should try to enjoy it” (Popper, 1994, p.36). The debates of the students conducted in school, colleges and universities have nothing to do with the Dialectical Method of Socrates because they deny the existence of contradictions within one point of view. The debates held in schools or colleges are actually in either/or style. It has no connection with the method of Socrates. Socratic Method does not encourage verbosity, miss use of language and shallow or one sided approach. This method can be used in dialogues and group discussions but not in debates. This method can be used in theoretical subjects especially. In sociology, History, Anthropology and Geology, it seems useful to clarify the fundamental concepts, their nature, and limitations in order to go ahead. The method of Socrates can help develop the speaking power of the students without being irresponsible and careless in using different words.

The Importance of Dialectical Method in Law

Philosophy of Law is all about defining things, interpretations, and explanations. Without a proper discussion and dialogue and without a proper sensibility of words, key terms and defining words, the explanation or interpretation of any Law cannot be possible (Wilberding, 2019). For example in Later Greek Philosophy and in the famous reported discussions of Sceptics, we find two extraordinary points of wisdom one is called Silence and the second is called Suspension of the Judgment (Stace, 2010). According to Sceptics in a conflicting situation one should be silent rather than being talkative and one should suspend his or her value judgment rather being judgmental without the proper discussion, analysis, scrutinisation and conclusion. Any Law of any kind can be explained or interpreted in different ways. This is because of the inherent contradictions found in human language. The fundamental concept in Law is obviously the concept of Justice but it is not difficult to understand that this concept varies from situation to situation and it has been changing in different eras and epochs of history. The Dialectical Method of Socrates help us understand the nature of language, the structure of any language and the inherent ambiguity found in every language (Sarup, 1988).

The Limitations of the Method

In spite of its practical and pragmatic value and in spite of its sound Philosophical framework, the Dialectical Method of Socrates has its own limitations. The first and the foremost thing about this Method is that it works like a negative argument and is passive in nature. In this Method the discussion starts with the statement of the other person. The other person can belong to the field of Sociology, Physiology, Philosophy or History etc. The other person can belong to the fields of Music, Painting, Sculpture or Poetry etc. The upholder of this Method will act as a critical agent and as a negative argument to falsify the given statement. The positive statements can be from any form of learning and the negative argument will always be from the Dialectical Method of Socrates. Perhaps, this is why Socrates wrote nothing or he did not try to write down the details of his Method. There are very few positive statements related to Socrates (Magee, 2001). For example

1. Knowledge is virtue and virtue is Knowledge.
2. Knowledge is to form concepts.

The above mentioned two statements are actually highlight the importance of forming the concepts (which are innate according to Socrates) and to equate knowledge with Ethics (Hintikka, 2007). It is a known fact about Socrates that he was neither interested in Metaphysics nor Cosmology. His primary concern was the moral life of the individuals especially the people of Athens and to highlight and explain the role of reason in human knowledge (Perdue, 2014). We cannot expect the Cosmological knowledge, the Metaphysical understanding or the knowledge of History or Psychology from this Method. These are the limitations of it. This Method is Critical and Negative (as mentioned above) and can be used in order to explain the basic and fundamental concepts of any field. It is very much like the pre-knowledge of anything. The second important limitation of it is that it requires an extraordinary personality like Socrates in order to proceed the dialogue. If the teacher (classroom teacher or a Guru etc) is not extraordinary or brilliant, the dialogue or interaction could be a joke or a futile effort. This Method can be applied in discussions, dialogues or interactions but in any situation in order to get an outstanding result, there will be a need of an outstanding personality if not like Socrates, very much closer to him. In the absence of an extraordinary teacher (who is supposed to be the originator of the discussion) and in the absence of a clear and precise curriculum this Method can hardly be incorporated in traditional academia.

On the other hand this Method can be used in co-curricular activities of different grades in education, for generating new ideas in research in higher education and especially this Method can be used for the development of inter-disciplinary dialogues.

Research Methodology

This article is basically philosophical in nature. It highlights the relevance of Socratic Method in contemporary education. For this purpose, the original writings of Plato (the great student of Socrates) were used (as mentioned above Socrates did not write anything. We know his method through the writings of Plato). The writings of W. T. Stace, Bertrand Russell and Karl R. Popper have also been utilized especially. Some books like, *The collected dialogues of Plato including the letters*, *A Critical history of Greek Philosophy*, *History of Western Philosophy* and *A Pocket Popper* were studied primarily. Moreover, the research articles relating to the Socratic Method of Paul Churchland, Lynda George and Karl R. Popper have been studied. Along with this kind of written material the philosophical series of BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) hosted by the famous Philosopher and Intellectual Brayan Magee and the talks of Ray Monk has been watched and benefited from. Magee published (afterwards) the whole series in book form named *Talking Philosophies*. This book has also been studied, especially its portion relating to the Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. The author analyzed the data in written and also in audio visual form. After the proper analysis of the data, the author has tried to apply it (theoretically) in Physical Sciences, Law, Mathematics and Social Sciences (in What, Why and How questions technically).

Example 1

An imaginary example can help understand and comprehend the Dialectical Method of Socrates.

Socrates – What is Education?

Another Person – Education is the process of learning and sharing.

Socrates – Learning from whom? And sharing with whom?

AP – Learning from teacher and sharing with everybody especially students.

Socrates – What do you mean by learning?

AP – Learning is to know something new.

Socrates – Nothing is new under the sun

AP – What do you mean by this?

Socrates – We cannot know anything which is not in built in us.

AP – You mean we are born with education?

Socrates – No we are born neither with education nor knowledge.

AP – What do you mean exactly than?

Socrates – I mean that we are born with simple and fundamental ideas of knowledge and Ethics.

AP – So strange! Than what is the need of schools, colleges, universities, teachers and Gurus?

Socrates – They are important to make us understand what we actually are.

AP – What do you mean by this. It seems very poetic.

Socrates – What do you mean by poetic? Do you mean poetry has no cognitive value?

AP – (hesitatingly) I mean it is nothing but a set of beautiful words.

Socrates – No it is not. We are not born blind by Nature or God my friend we are born with fundamental ideas through education and from teachers we can develop these ideas and this is the process of Education.

AP – And now tell me something about sharing.

Socrates – Sharing is to make others understand what you understand already.
AP – What if I do not want to share my ideas?

Socrates – (Smiling) than you can never know about the weakness and inconsistencies within your ideas.

Example 2

Socrates – What is Mathematics?
Another person – Mathematics is a form of learning in which numbers and equations exist.

Socrates – From where do the numbers and equations come from?
AP – It is a very difficult question but I think... from the external world.

Socrates – No not at all. In external world we find material things and not numbers.
AP – We can apply numbers to almost every material thing.

Socrates – I am not talking about the application, I am talking about deriving from.
AP – (In a very confused way) than where do the numbers come from?

Socrates – I think we are born with numbers, think with the concepts of them.
AP – (In a very low voice) Perhaps.

Example 3

Socrates – What is History?
Another person – History is the written description of Past events.

Socrates – In other words History has no corresponding facts?
AP – What do you mean by corresponding?

Socrates – Corresponding means the relation between ideas and their material existence.
AP – Please explain your point of view.

Socrates – It is not difficult to understand. We have a concept of chair and there exist an actual chair in the outer world. We have the concepts of table, chair, sky, Earth and all the concepts have their corresponding existence.

AP – But we have these sorts of concepts also like happiness, sadness, feeling of hatred.

Socrates – But there are external events and people through them we can understand the meaning of these concepts.

AP – What is History than? And what is its validity?

Socrates – (Smilingly) Let us sort it together.

The above three imaginary examples (self-created) show the importance and the character of Socratic dialogues.

Discussion

This article aims at the theoretical and philosophical clarification and explanation of Socratic style of teaching called Dialectical method. For the proper explanation three imaginary (self-created) examples have been given. The author presented them as *Example 1*, *Example 2* and *Example 3*. This imaginary discussions are in accordance with the nature and scope of Socratic Method. The pre-suppositions behind

this method and relating discussions are to believe in simple and fundamental innate ideas (as mentioned above), to accept intellectual intuition and accept Rationalism Epistemologically.

Conclusion

Socrates is supposed to be the great teacher of the ancient Greece. He produced many outstanding students like Plato and Aristotle. The technical name of his method is Dialectical Method. In this method the inherent contradictions within any statement (Scientific, Artistic, or Social Scientific) are highlighted and within the contradictions, it is attempted to reach at a synthesis. This method has its own unique character and can be used in integrated curriculum especially. This method can be used in interdisciplinary dialogues because there is no fixed content of it. Anything can be a part and parcel of the Dialectical method of Socrates provided the participants are intellectually sound and intelligent. This Method can be used as a negative argument to falsify any given statement in order to check its validity. The whole method of Socrates has its own pre-supposed notions. Epistemologically Socrates can be categorized among Rationalists who believe in the innate and latent ideas. According to Rationalist Man is born with fundamental simple ideas and for them knowledge is a discovery and not an invention. In this way this method is primarily concerned with What and Why questions and not How. In this article it has been attempted to highlight the Limitations, Delimitations, the Pragmatic value and the Epistemological position behind this whole phenomenon. To believe in Dialectical Method of Socrates is to believe in the inner contradiction of any statement (verbal) of any kind.

Recommendations

The researcher proposes the following recommendations of the study:

1. The Dialectical Method of Socrates can successfully be used in the inter-disciplinary dialogues.
2. This Method can also be used in order to clarify the key concepts of any subject.
3. This method can appropriately be used in any process of integrated curriculum.
4. This method not only clarifies the basic and fundamental concepts of different forms of learning but it also highlights the similarities, dissimilarities and overlapping character of different forms of learning.
5. This method should be used in Academia for the proper grooming of the students because it will help them develop their language skills and communication orally and also in written form.

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