

The Socratic Approach

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Socrates, the father of Western philosophy, used different approaches to discover the truth, depending on whether a situation involved opposing viewpoints or students who wanted to learn from him. His way of teaching continues to influence the manner in which philosophy is taught today because it is a way that leads to understanding.

This tutorial investigates the Socratic approach in three parts:

1. [The Character of Socrates](#)
2. [Dialectic](#)
3. [The Socratic Method](#)

1. The Character of Socrates

Socrates was a man of virtue. He is remembered and revered because he lived according to his principles, which he believed were correct. His life was guided by what sound reasoning led him to conclude was right. He was a man of keen intellect and upstanding moral character.

Socrates' life was completely involved in the pursuit of philosophy, truth, and wisdom. What he did not know, he sought to discover. The *Symposium* describes Socrates standing outside a building before entering a party that was being held there, thinking about something that had been puzzling him. His extreme dedication to learning led him to become a teacher. Although he was an excellent instructor, he did not charge his students for the lessons they received. He shared wisdom with all who sought it.

Socrates dedicated his life (and death) to doing what he thought was right, to his quest for wisdom and ethics. His final moments are recorded in a dialogue called the *Phaedo*, which will be covered in a subsequent tutorial. The last line of the *Phaedo* summarizes how he is regarded by those who knew him: "Such was the end...of our friend; concerning whom I may truly say, that of all the men of his time whom I have known, he was the wisest and justest and best."

2. Dialectic

Socrates sought wisdom through philosophy. He believed that philosophy was best pursued by a method (carried on by Plato) called **dialectic**.

Dialectic is a somewhat more noble endeavor than debate. The goal of a debate is to *win*—to use arguments in a way that enables your side to prevail. (The skill used to win debates is *rhetoric*.) Winning, however, is not the goal of dialectic.

Dialectic is used to find the truth. When opposing viewpoints are involved, one is wrong, and the other is right. It is the dialectician's job to determine which is which. This is a philosophical endeavor: not only because philosophy pursues truth and seeks to separate knowledge from opinion, but also because of the importance of logic and reasoning in dialectic.

Unlike the process of rhetorical debate, only *good* reasoning prevails in philosophical dialectic. Since logic, like mathematics, is universal and dispassionate, when the truth is discovered, both sides in a dialectic can, should, and do recognize it. Since the emphasis is on truth and reason, bias, emotion, upbringing, and worldview are set aside. This makes dialectic an objective process, motivated by a genuine desire for truth on all sides.

Imagine contemporary political debates being conducted in this way. If two political opponents were united in a search for truth, they would engage in genuine, open-minded inquiry as to what is the best course of action for their country, instead of the familiar quest for personal advantage and victory.

If this seems unrealistic, focus on your own experience.



THINK ABOUT IT

Consider whether you have ever had a discussion, perhaps with a friend or sibling, that resembled a dialectic. What influenced the way in which this discussion took place? First and foremost, *respect*. You didn't assume the worst about the person with whom you were chatting. You did not immediately dismiss his/her position as wrong. Also, since you did not dismiss his/her position, you questioned your own view. The discussion was a dialectic because you disagreed respectfully, and it was fruitful because you held your own view as being subject to questioning, rather than as inviolable. Neither of you tried to prove the other wrong. Together, you were simply searching what is true.

Socrates conducted all of his inquiries in this way and did not assume that any of his beliefs were inviolable. When following this standard, it does not matter whether you respect the person with whom you disagree, or whether you respect his or her point of view. All that matters is that you respect *truth*. If you do, you will ensure that all of your beliefs are true (or not) by questioning them. You will care enough about the truth to share it with others.



TERM TO KNOW

Dialectic

A discourse between two or more people of opposing viewpoints, the goal of which is to discover truth through reasoning

3. The Socratic Method

Dialectic is used by those who hold opposing viewpoints to dispassionately search for truth. Although the opponents initially disagree, they do so respectfully. A different method is required when one who knows a truth wants to teach it to others. When teaching, Socrates used the **Socratic Method**.

IN CONTEXT

Suppose a teacher has taught students how to multiply using flashcards and is moving on to more complicated multiplication problems. Here is an example of the Socratic Method:

Teacher: Do you know what 8 times 72 is?

Student: No, I don't.

Teacher: Do you know what 8 times 2 is?

Student: Of course, it's 16.

Teacher: Do you know what 8 times 3 is?

Student: Of course, it's 24.

Teacher: And what about 8 times 5?

Student: It's 40.

Teacher: And 3 plus 2?

Student: 5, of course.

Teacher: And 3 times 8 plus 2 times 8.

Student: ...40.

Teacher: So to compute 5 times 8, we can add two numbers that equal 5, eight times, then add their products?

Student: It seems so.

Teacher: Does it work with 1 times 8 and 4 times 8?

Student: Yes!

Teacher: It should always work since we know that multiplication is a complex form of addition. How might we multiply 72 times 8?

Student: Multiply some numbers that add to 72 by 8 and add their products.

Teacher: And which numbers might be easier?

Student: The ones I know.

Teacher: Good, so you already know 8 times 2.

Student: Yes, 16.

Teacher: What would we have to add to 2 to get 72?

Student: 70.

Teacher: What is 8 times 70?

Student: I don't know.

Teacher: What is 8 times 7?

Student: 56.

Teacher: So if 70 is seven tens, isn't 8 times 70, 56 tens?

Student: It must be!

Teacher: So what is 8 times 70?

Student: 560!

Teacher: And what is 8 times 72?

Student: 576!!!

In this example, the teacher has taught the student something new. This new knowledge will be the basis for solving longer multiplication problems. The teacher demonstrated how new knowledge can be achieved,

starting from what the student already knows. This teaching method has two advantages: Students who have accomplished some basic learning don't need to "reinvent the wheel" when attempting to answer more difficult questions. They can leverage what they already know.

Additionally (and more importantly, with respect to philosophy, and to life), by beginning with what he or she already knows and comprehending *why* the answer is what it is, students *understand* that an answer is true. This is the advantage of the Socratic Method. It is still used in schools, from the elementary through the doctoral level. It is an effective tool for teaching understanding because it *leads* the student to knowledge, instead of dictating it. It shows students how to achieve knowledge on their own, rather than simply giving them a collection of facts.



TERM TO KNOW

Socratic Method

The pedagogical method of teaching by asking questions to which the student knows the answers, thereby leading them, step by step, to the truth being taught



SUMMARY

Socrates is not only known for his constant quest for wisdom, and his rigorous commitment to right living, but also for his teaching method. He believed that truth and wisdom should be shared, not hoarded. He used dialectic to discover truth, and the Socratic Method to help others find it.

Source: This tutorial was authored by Sophia Learning. Please see our [Terms of Use](#).



ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Quotation from "The Phaedo"](#) | **Author:** Project Gutenberg | **License:** Public Domain



TERMS TO KNOW

Dialectic

A discourse between two or more people of opposing viewpoints, the ultimate goal of which is to discover the truth of the matter through reasoning

Socratic Method

The pedagogical method of teaching by asking questions to which the student knows the answer and thereby leading them to the truth being conveyed