

The Socratic Method And Deliberation In Democracy

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Abstract

The ability to doubt and question the existing beliefs, practices and traditions is critical for democracy. It is the very foundation of a democratic life that the participants of the democratic society engage in debates and deliberation to bring out truth and the ideals on which society, especially a diverse society, can be well organized. These participants would need to possess the ability to not only doubt their own way of life but also to question the judgments and the consensus within the republic that is democratic. In lieu of these arguments, I wish to propose that the ‘Socratic Method’ instills in the democratic citizens the quintessential attributes and character required for a successfully functioning Democracy in a diverse society. In this paper, I shall outline what we may conceive of the ‘Socratic Method’ and try to measure the applicability of the Socratic method in multicultural democracies.

Keywords: Socratic Method, Deliberation, Dialogue, Civic Participation , Multiculturalism and Democracy

I

To understand the Socratic method one may look at the virtues of eternal skepticism and unbridled inquiry as the primary attributes of Socrates’s philosophical vocation well highlighted in his defense speech written in Plato’s “*Apology*”. A unique humility of recognising that one does not have the possession of wisdom, may be considered as the first checkpoint in the Socratic method. Socrates himself realizes and wants the Democratic citizen to realize that they do not possess any wisdom or truth. And thus this realization would enable the democratic citizen to humble herself before stepping into the Socratic voyage of acquiring knowledge and truth. However humble the democratic citizen may be, and realizes that she does not possess any knowledge, Socrates would want her to be skeptical of anyone claiming to have knowledge. Therefore, the second step in the Socrates’s philosophical activity would be to have skepticism of the knowledge claimed by moral experts , politicians , interest groups, political parties and even artists. For Socrates, a strong confidence in the possession of knowledge and its imagined ideal applicability is a possible threat to the deliberative process required to bring out truth in everyday dynamic life of Democratic practice.

Gregory Vlastos noted that Socrates arrives at the conclusion by the method which is of *elenchus* which means first there is to examine and then refute or put to shame. The method requires that in the dialogue both parties’ voices are heard. The first and foremost condition is that the respondent in the dialogue must say what she really thinks and believes. The history of the emergence of the socratic method is very crucial. It was the period around 469-399 BCE when Socrates completed his

formal education and Sophists who were orators and persuaders exercised power in Greek society. They persuaded the audience to accept the speaker's point of view through the rhetoric in Greek society. This kind of use of rhetoric in Greek society negatively impacted the critical thinking of the people. It also encouraged spread of ignorance and cultural biases in the society. But soon Later on, one of the Sophists from Oracle at Delphi in the heated argument told Charepreon who was also Socrates' friend, that there was no one wiser than Socrates in the Greek Society. Socrates was bewildered by this answer and went on to question the acclaimed intellectual and wise people of the Greek Society. He found out that all these people lacked both the traits. The method followed by Socrates was questioning these people and seeking the answers. The questioning of the old and wise people in the society highly impressed the youth of Greece and many became Socrates followers who devoted themselves to philosophy.

The Socratic method works with questioning and answering until there are no clear answers. Socrates first asks the interlocutor in the dialogue to define some concept and seeks answers and then begins his questioning to reveal the logical fallacies of the interlocutor. Socrates usually applied this method to concepts which don't seem to have a certain definition. This method challenged the moral beliefs of the Sophists. It led to many inadequacies and inconsistencies on many concepts. But unlike others who claim to have knowledge on these concepts Socrates professed and was aware of his ignorance towards these concepts. Hence' we can see this was an element of self-critique and self-reflection . "Life without examination is not worth living" for Socrates.

Dorothy Tarrant notes that the essence of dialogue lies in the interaction of human minds. Humans are interacting as moral agents who possess virtues like honesty, reasonableness, and courage. The honesty is to say what one really thinks , the reasonableness is to admit what one really doesn't know and the courage to continue the investigation. The *elenchus* which is central to Socratic Philosophy puts the moral demands on the questioner and the respondents in the dialogue. *Kenneth Seeskin* in his book "*Dialogue and Discovery*" argues that the purpose of the *elenchus* is to facilitate the discovery in the dialogue but in Socratic philosophy discovery is not a sudden flash of illumination. The discovery is something earned by the soul. In Tarrant words , the soul which must free itself from anger, laziness and arrogance which was apparently present in many Socrates respondents. The search for knowledge and the truth in the dialogical terms requires some essential ethics and virtues. In the *Republic*, Socrates is critical that elenchus or refutation can entirely change the ideas and views of the interlocutors but it can put the soul of the interlocutors in the right direction by making the reality of what she/her thinks more clearer.

Hans Gadamer who belongs to the German Historical school of Hermeneutics believed that dialogue is the best way to reach an understanding. It was an important tool for self-reflection and self-critique. It is important to acknowledge the otherness and the claim to the truth of the 'other' person in order to have a genuine dialogue. This also coincides with the idea when Socrates asks to be the true and honest self in the dialogue. The idea of agreement and consensus is very central to it. He also thinks that the monotonous "yeses" that Socrates received from his interlocutors is very important to have dialogue of consensus. Many contemporary deliberative democrats take over this "yesyes" in the dialogue and conceive dialogically achieved consensus as the mark of legitimacy for decisions in multicultural societies that are permeated with disagreements. Consensus here comes from the test of the capacity of

the democracy that how well it can cope with the religious, political and ethical differences. Yet, the yeses of Socrates' interlocutors can also signal the surrender to the strong arguer whom they presume will win. The idea behind the Socratic method of dialogue was not to win an argument or not merely presenting ideas but to reach a deeper understanding in the dialogue.

II

According to Socrates's philosophical vocation, democratic citizens' eternal skepticism may be understood as the foundational virtue required for a forward civic participation in a democratic society. The Socratic Method is not only a dialectical method in the personal life of the citizen but it is highly desirable in the public life of the democratic citizens because this will ensure that the Socratic method becomes the method in democracy. Therefore I would also like to argue that the applicability of the Socratic Method in the experiments of democracy may be more fruitful if taken from the bottom-up approach. With the sense of deliberative democracy, one must desire that it should be the imperative of the citizens to apply Socratic method in the democratic life as opposed to any policy of the state. Socratic method will radiate beyond the private individual life and become a practice in doubting the beliefs and traditions of the political regime. It is essential for democracy in the diverse society that the citizens prevent themselves from being glued towards a linear set of viewpoints and ideas. A linear set of viewpoints of ideas may make a narrower wisdom and shrank truth obstructing the required scrutiny of the prevailing regime.

A healthy maintenance of a democratic republic would ask for a broader civic participation in the form of a broader examination of the political patterns, discourses, and regimes' policies. In this line of the broader civic participation, Socratic skepticism would also examine the range of the participation; whether the civic participation is inclusive or not? Whether all people at the receiving end are involved and engaged in the participation. An inquiry into truth should not be initiated only by some, when the consequences of truth concern almost all the participants in the society. Therefore, it can be argued that the Socratic method is inherently inclusive in nature for the political life in a democracy. An inclusive deliberation, involving more and more parties will result in more checks and questions. Therefore a Socratic method in a democracy will not only lead to more inclusiveness but shall also enhance the quality of civic participation. With this sense of a democratic life infused with Socrates dialectic shall produce a citizenry which is humble enough to undertake self-reflection and consequentially self-reform resulting in the mutually supportive practice of good life in a community living.

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