Abstract

Although Socratic questioning is sometimes said to stimulate curiosity, analysis of the dialogues reveals that curiosity cannot be seen to follow from the questioning method. Other factors, including the felt importance of knowing, may account for curiosity but constitute preconditions rather than results of questioning. The dialogue texts show that the most successful episodes from the pedagogical point of view involve respondents who were already curious at the start. Hence a critical examination may be needed of the traditional grounds for a common educational notion, that teacher questioning—like Socrates'—arouses curiosity and inquiry in the student.

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Curiosity as Non Sequitur of Socratic Questioning

Asking questions on a Socratic model is a characteristic teacher behavior. One of the purposes for this questioning is presumably to stimulate curiosity and inquiry in the student, for that is just the effect attributed to Socrates' questioning (e.g., *Meno* 84). However, that may be less the effect of questioning than of other factors, including the felt importance of knowing. Moreover, that factor itself is not an effect but rather a precondition, in two respects: (a) existing prior to the questioning, and (b) constituting a prerequisite for curiousity. In this sense curiosity might be thought a non sequitur of Socratic questioning.

As an exemplar of this problem, a passage from the *Meno* will be set out, and two objections entered against the asserted effect of Socrates' questions. These objections will then be developed in the remainder of the paper, with reference to other dialogues as well.

In the *Meno,* as is his wont elsewhere, Socrates elicits from a slave-boy first a statement of knowledge and then a statement of ignorance. That characterizes his technique of elenchus, whereby a respondent who asserts knowledge of something is led by Socrates' questions to perceive inconsistencies, contradictions, or falsehood of some sort in his opinions. At the point where the boy responds, "It's no use, Socrates, I just don't know," Socrates breaks off the questioning and makes these observations to Meno.

> At the beginning he did not know the side of the square of eight feet. Nor indeed does he know it now, but then he thought he knew it and answered boldly, as was appropriate—he felt no perplexity. Now however he does feel perplexed. Not only does he not know the answer; he doesn't even think he knows.
>
> In fact we have helped him to some extent towards finding out the right answer, for now not only is he ignorant of it but he will be quite glad to look for it.
>
> Do you suppose then that he would have attempted to look for, or learn, what he thought he knew (though he did not), before he was thrown into perplexity, became aware of his ignorance, and felt a desire to know? (84ac, Guthrie trans.)

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That is an exemplary statement of the effect asserted for elenchus. The respondent is moved from (a) I know, to (b) I don't know, wherefore to (c) I desire to know, and (d) I wish to inquire. But there arise a number of problems in following that progression. Two will be explored here, one having to do with psychological plausibility and the other with depiction in the text of the dialogue.

The desire to know does not follow of itself from the realization of not knowing. It is true that a person will not desire to know that which he believes he knows already. But knowledge displaces curiosity, removal of knowledge does not reinstall curiosity. The realization of ignorance is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the desire to know and to inquire after the unknown. The complement may be put as the felt need or necessity to know. The person must feel bothered by not knowing; he must think he ought or should know; knowing must be important to him in some personally-experienced respect. These are not assured by the anterior possession of a bit of knowledge now realized to be false. For one, the knowledge may no longer be of much import. For another, retention of knowledge is more or less a passive affair, entailing less psychic energy and arousal than the pursuit and acquisition of new knowledge. That new bit of knowledge, once perceived as lacking, must also be seen to serve some present purpose, to achieve some present goal, to solve some problem presently being experienced. Thus, to move from (a) I don't know, to (c) I want to know and will attempt to know, the person requires to feel (b) I have to know.

The desire to know and to inquire is not depicted in the text of the dialogue. Apart from Socrates' attributions, the slave-boy passage itself gives no clue as to the curiosity which the boy is supposedly experiencing. The boy says, I do not know; Socrates says, He wants to know and will be glad to inquire; no one says, He needs to know. Nothing about the boy or the situation evinces a sense of wonder, of desire to know, of appetite for the pursuit of inquiry, of importance attaching to that knowledge or rue over that ignorance. The boy does not know the side of an eight-foot square. Nor does he know, probably, the price of tea in China. The picture is of a servant called away from one chore and given another, to compute the square of an hypotenuse. There is no depiction of whether he wanted to join and then pursue the inquiry and whether he cared a whit for the knowledge or ignorance thereof. Thus the text leaves us wondering about the asserted effect of Socratic elenchus.

Nonetheless, scholars generally concur in the notion that Socrates' questions have aroused curiosity in the slave-boy, and they commend his method as pedagogically valuable. In elucidating this passage from the *Meno,* some scholars appear to affirm as well as to reiterate the contentions. For example, Guthrie describes the value of Socratic elenchus as that it "instills the desire to learn as a natural consequence of coming to realize one's ignorance."[1] Similarly, Robinson reiterates that "the recognition that we do not know at once arouses the desire to know."[2] He interprets Plato to suggest that elenchus aims to "wake genuine intellectual curiosity" (p. 18); to assert that "elenchus supplies the wonder" (p. 12); and to believe that "elenchus is the way to arouse curiosity. Elenchus is thus a method of teaching" (p. 12). For their part, educators reiterate the same notion and entertain the same belief. It is a prominent and traditional view that teacher questions stimulate curiosity and inquiry in students.[3] In forwarding that notion, the pedagogical literature rarely fails to refer to Socrates, most often to his questioning in the *Meno.* It may be that educators by and large have taken their model of Socratic questioning mostly from the *Meno,* especially from the slave-boy

passage, and possibly by way of scholarly references as to the stimulating effects which that questioning has or is asserted by Plato to have. It can be noted that certain scholars reject the notions just reviewed. For example, Eckstein believes that Plato intended the slave-boy scent "to be taken as a farce and not as a paradigm of teaching";[4] and Skinner dubs it "one of the great frauds in the history of education."[5]

Scholarly as well as pedagogical interests might be served by a critical examination of the effects of Socratic quetioning. To what extent do the dialogues depict curiosity to be its effect upon respondents? Apart from the texts, in what way might the desire to know and to inquire follow upon the realization of not knowing? Inspection of the texts will be restricted to the so-called Socratic, or earlier dialogues, and only those in which Socrates is an active questioner. (The second restriction removes the *Apology, Crito,* and *Menexenus,* leaving for consideration these eleven: *Charmides, Euthydemus, Euthyphro, Gorgias, Hippias Minor, Ion, Laches, Lysis, Meno, Protagoras,* and *Republic I.* The texts are from the Bollingen Series edited by Hamilton and Cairns.)

One trait of Socrates, familiar to contemporaries (cf. *Meno* 80a; *Tht.* 14b), was that he "reduced" people to perplexity, as Meno put it; or as Socrates retorted, he "infected" others also with the perplexity which he felt himself (*Meno* 80c). One must first distinguish between Socrates' perplexity and that of his respondents, and further, between his attributions and their exhibitions of perplexity. At times Socrates says that he and his respondents are both perplexed, and both will appear to be so (e.g., *La.* 200e). But at other times he attributes perplexity to a respondent who otherwide exhibits none at all. That is the case with his remarks about the slaveboy (*Memo* 84), and his summations with Gorgias (*Grg.* 461) and Hippias (*Hp. Mi.* 376c), for instances. In the *Charmides,* Socrates avers that Critias was infected with a difficulty by Socrates' own difficulty, like one person catching an infectious yawn from another; yet Critias is not shown to be much perplexed; Socrates says Critias is only trying to hide the perplexity which he really does feel (*Chrm.* 169c). The dialogues brim with perplexity, doubt, wonder, ignorance and so on. But in examining the texts for the effect of Socrates' questions upon the respondent, one must subtract the manifold perplexities which Socrates avows experiencing of himself, together with whose which he attributes to others without their exhibiting them for us to see. Of the remainder, clear exhibitions are given by Meno (80ab), by Laches and Nicias (*La.* 194ab, 200a), by Charmides (*Chrm.* 176ab), by Polemarchus (*Rp.* I. 335e), and by Lysis and Menexenus (*Ly.* 210d, 213c).

Other, negative, effects of Socrates' questioning are depicted. Resentment, anger, and hostility are some of the effects which Socrates also attributed to his questioning (*Ap.* 21e; *Tht.* 151c). In some cases, as with Gorgias and Protagoras, it is plain that respondents never moved from their initial assertions of knowledge to concessions of ignorance, and hence exhibited no curiosity. In other cases, respondents who conceded ignorance did not thereupon pass naturally, easily, or at once (a la *Meno*) to the desire to know and the willingness to inquire. At that juncture, Thrasymachus was minded to depart (*Rp.* I. 343d), and Callicles told Socrates to go on alone and finish the argument himself (*Grg.* 506c). Many of those refuted by Socrates went away and came to him no more, Xenophon tells us; "and these he regarded as too dull to be improved" (*Mem.* IV.2. 40). That remark hints at the existence of qualities in the respondent upon the possession of which is contingent the success of Socratic elenchus. Perhaps in other cases the social circumstance has

a bearing. But whether for individual disposition or social situation, certain factors could determine whether curiosity results. And some factors may well represent pre-conditions and pre-requisites rather than results and effects of the questioning.

The texts manifest that Socrates' interlocutors do not in every case exhibit the perplexity which Socrates attributes to them. They show also that the questioning does not in every case convict of ignorance, nor in every case of ignorance do they show consequential desire to know and inquire. There are then negative cases and positive cases; is there a typical or predominant case? Of considerably greater interest than the recording of instances is the possibility that a pattern emerge when the dialogues are considered together in relation to each other.

On the view that Socratic questioning arouses curiosity in consequence of conviction of ignorance, one presupposes that the greater the knowledge to begin with, the greater will be the perplexity thereafter. But the impression one gathers is that interlocutors who were most perplexed at the end of the dialogue were just those who also showed themselves to have little knowledge at the start; whereas the most knowledgeable proved in the end the least perplexed. The question arises, whether Socratic elenchus appears more effective with the less knowledgeable and younger respondents, and whether these might not have been curious to begin with rather than as a result? These impressions were checked by the following method.

Each interlocutor in the dialogues who has a sustained question-answer conversation with Socrates was ranked on two attributes. One is the knowledge which he is depicted to possess or proclaim at the start of the conversation. The lowest degree would be the mere supplying of a ready answer to Socrates' main question, and the highest the claim to know everything or to be the best in something. The other attribute is the perplexity which the respondent evinces in the course of the questioning. Perplexity embraces assents to inconsistency, confessions of ignorance, doubt, and wonder, and expressions of willingness to pursue the inquiry. The lowest degree would be silence or refusal to assent, and the highest a combination of I don't know, I want to know and to inquire. To correct for varying lengths of conversations, these elements were scored for presence/absence rather than for each instance. The combined ranking remains impressionistic and not strictly empirical; adjustments were made by comparing the status of one interlocutor to the next.

The result is shown in Figure 1. There the interlocutors are distributed on the two dimensions, knowledge and perplexity. If a line were to be drawn approximating the central tendency, it would suggest an inverse correlation. The figure is taken to be suggestive of an emergent pattern. No doubt other ranks could be devised, positions shuffled, and more precision attained; yet the distribution would likely remain much as shown. One generalization that seems warranted is that the greater the degree of initial knowledge, the weaker the perplexity that results from questioning. Another summary might be that the more eristic style of questioning is associated with the less eventual curiosity and inquiry. Further, it looks as if the younger respondents were on the whole more stimulated than the comparatively older ones (Thaetetus has been added to supplement the smaller number of younger respondents; the first part of this dialogue (*Tht.* 145-166) resembles the earlier ones in form and tone if not content.) This venture may suggest other, more fruitful attempts to assemble the dialogues and discern some trend.

Certain conditions are required for the questioning to convict of ignorance or, in the less refutative dialogues, to elicit incongruities. But further conditions are required to assure the desire to know and inquire. Some of these, so it appears in the dialogues, prerequisites rather than consequences of the questioning, and come very close to assuring curiosity at the start rather than the finish. Must inquiry have its start in a rescue from some humiliating situation (Clinias) or a seduction by an attractive one (Lysis)—or yet by a trick (Charmides)? Must interlocutors themselves first raise a question (Meno) or invite Socrates to teach them all he can (Laches)? Must the interlocutor be young and simple (Clinias), modest, docile, and disingenuous (Lysis)—in sum, must he be the perfect pupil who, like Theatetus, is zealous and curious over the question to begin with (cf. 149de)? Thus might Socratic questioning profit from situational and personal antecedents which, when joined to its own proper effects, eventuate in the desire to know and the willingness to inquire.

One such condition has been suggested to be the felt importance of knowing. It emerges from psychological analysis and cannot easily be discerned in the texts of these dialogues. On that view, for curiosity to arise and inquiry to proceed, the realization of not knowing must be joined by the experienced necessity to know. In psychological terms, this need to know is felt or experienced by the person himself, and it attaches to the entity that is unknown. By contrast, a person can be said to be in need of knowing whereas he does not himself experience the need; and, when shown ignorant in company, he can experience a need ostensibly to know whereas intentionally to restore status, not knowledge, and to remedy not ignorance but its appearance and consequence in society. The need to know arises when not-knowing represents a problem to the person. Ignorance is experienced as distressing, irritating, or in some wise dissatisfying; knowledge is perceived as important, valuable, useful, necessary; and these because of some goal or purpose in which the person has investment and involvement but insufficient achievement. The degree of personal investment in this goal would determine in part the degree of felt need to know, which in turn would give rise to a comparable degree of curiosity and effort to inquire. No one will search for what he already has, nor, lacking that, what he does not need to have. Without experienced relation to personal goals, the knowledge of which a person is ignorant, even consciously so, would have no attraction: he would not need it, desire it, or move to seek it; no problem would exist for him.[6]

This urgency to know is surpassingly evident in the experience of Socrates. But the dialogues under review otherwise give little dramatic account of it, and perhaps no didactic one. It is not stipulated as one of the conditions for inquiry, nor as part of the experience of Socrates' interlocutors. Even in cases of respondents who are clearly depicted as desiring to know, only a glimpse or two may be given of their felt need to know. Nicias declares that he and Laches are "equally ignorant of the things which a man with any self-respect should know" (*La.* 200a). One can infer that knowledge of this and that must have appeared necessary for educating the young, for practising a profession, or for living the good Athenian life. Yet that is labored extraction from the dialogues; the point is neither much illustrated nor demonstrated. If the issue has merit, scholars may wish to assess Plato's awareness of this condition for inquiry, the importance he attaches to it, and the account he gives to it especially in relation to Socratic questioning.

One comes away from these dialogues wondering about the assertion that Socrates' questions arouse the desire to know and to inquire. Perhaps Plato did not

intend just that asserted in the *Meno*. Perhaps educators mistakenly rely on that belief and model in emphasizing the use of questions for the purpose of stimulating inquiry. Whether in the dialogues or in the classroom, curiosity probably does not follow from Socratic questioning.[7]

Resume

Bien que l'on considère que la méthode socratique suscite la curiosité, l'analyse des dialogues révèle que tel n'est pas toujours le cas. D'autres facteurs doivent être pris en considération (tel le désir de savoir), mais ils constituent des conditions préalables plutôt que des résultats de cette méthode. Les textes des dialogues montrent que les épisodes les plus réussis du point de vue de l'éducation présupposent des locuteurs dont la curiosité a déjà été éveillée au départ. C'est pourquoi il faut peut-être réexaminer d'une façon critique ce postulat généralement admis dans le domaine de l'éducation: qu'un professeur qui enterroge comme Socrate éveille la curiosité des ses étudiants.

Notes

[1]W. K. C. Guthrie, Introduction to the *Meno* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1956), p. 108.

[2]Richard Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1941), p. 12.

[3]See for example, George H. Betts, *The Recitation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1910); Phillip Groisser, *How to Use the Fine Art of Questioning* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Teachers Practical Press, 1964),

[4]Jerome Eckstein, *The Platonic Method: An Interpretation of the Dramatic-Philosophic Aspects of the Meno* (New York: Greenwood, 1968), p. 11.

[5]Burrhus F. Skinner, *The Technology of Teaching* (New York: Appleton, 1968), p. 61.

[6]For elaborations of this point from various psychological, philosophical, and pedagogical perspectives, see these examples: David E. Berlyne, *Structure and Direction in Thinking* (New York: Wiley, 1965); Morris L. Bigge, *Learning Theories for Teachers,* 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); J. T. Dillon, "Using Questions to Depress Student Thought," *School Review,* in press; and Thomas S. Knight, "Questions and Universals," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research,* 27 (1967), 564-576.

[7]Acknowledgement is gladly made to Professors Harold B. Dunkel and Frederick F. Lighthall for their suggestions on earlier drafts of this paper.

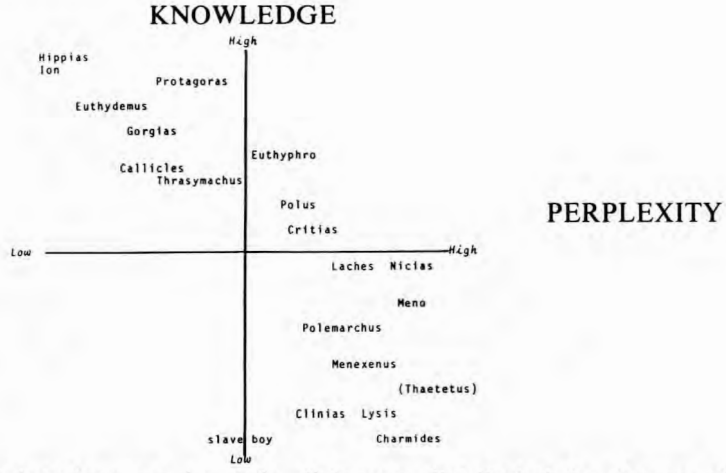

Figure 1. Socrates' interlocutors in early dialogues distributed by degree of knowledge at start of questioning, and degree of perplexity thereafter.