

THE SOCRATIC METHOD AND PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN

In 1963 James A. Jordan Jr. claimed that "It is not difficult nowadays to run into a claim that such and such teaching method follows the principle implicit in the method of Socrates." Jordan's claim refers particularly to supporters of programmed instruction or the use of teaching machines. He argued that the use or application of such materials cannot lead to genuine imitation of Socrates. Today, although the use and application of computers in schools has increased, the claim of following the Socratic Method is usually made by teachers who allow or encourage "classroom discussions".² Some might even claim that this is the only appropriate or suitable method of learning. And thus some make derogatory remarks about the use of lectures which are identified as a direct, passive method of teaching not compatible with the discussion method.³ Others, possibly also claiming to be following Socrates, suggest that the teacher should be "neutral" and not intervene directly in a classroom discussion or at least limit such interventions as much as possible. Several questions need to be considered: Is it the case that a teacher who focuses on the importance of questions as a device for learning or who promotes classroom discussions is therefore always following Socrates? Is the Socratic Method a method of teaching; that is, can we teach socratically? What role should a teacher play if one aims at following the Socratic Method? Does the Socratic Method preclude lectures or direct explanations? Is the Socratic Method the only educationally suitable method of learning?

The current catch-phrase in Language Arts is the "holistic approach". Although this approach promotes, among other things, questioning, active participation by students, discussions and thinking for oneself, references to the Socratic Method are scarce. A colleague of mine who teaches Language Arts and Reading courses hypothesizes that the scant references to the Socratic Method by Language Arts teachers and specialists arises because of the popular impression that the questioning used in this method is closed-ended. On the contrary, proponents of doing philosophy with children--a process or programme which is partially based on the ideal of open-mindedness--make frequent references to Socrates.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: To examine the nature of the Socratic Method keeping in mind some of the questions raised in the introductory paragraph, and to explore some of the implications of following the Socratic Method in implementing the Philosophy for Children Program.

SECTION A

What is the Socratic method? As the phrase indicates, the Socratic Method refers to the method of discussion, inquiry, "teaching" employed by Socrates. What are the principles underlying this method? The answer emerges from a related question: What role did Socrates play in these discussions, conversations?

The image that is usually used to describe Socrates' role is that of a midwife.⁵ That is, Socrates is seen as someone who helps others acquire the truth rather than as one who goes about proclaiming that he has the truth. But reference to the midwife is only an image, an analogy, and analogies are not meant to be taken as an expression of identity. They capture part of, but not all, the story. In our case the image is not complete for Socrates himself is an inquirer of truth. He assists others but he himself is also searching for the truth. As Jordan puts it: "He makes no claim to wisdom; he seeks only to expose fraudulent claims to wisdom or to learn from those who are wise."⁶ He has the ability to examine someone's position or claims to truth, he discerns oddities in a position (contradictions, inconsistencies, lack of good reason, incomplete definitions), and on these grounds he rejects positions that seem to be proclaiming the truth. He is also willing to learn from others and thus he is ready to listen to other positions and reasons.

Another metaphor that is used to describe Socrates is that of a gadfly--an irritating, harassing insect. Socrates is seen as one who provokes by incessantly asking crucial questions, not because he wants to irritate the participants engaged in a discussion, but because of his fervour to arrive at the truth. To express it rather paradoxically: he is a truth-fanatic. Just as for Dewey there is no end to "growth" save more growth, likewise for Socrates there is no end to truth save more truth.

His major role is that of an open-minded inquirer who patiently and systematically attempts to discover the truth through dialogue with others, examining positions (including his own) impartially. Since he is trying to discover the truth, by implication he does not know the whole truth (what the truth is)--at least with regard to the issue that is being discussed. His role, at times, comes close to that of a student if a student is demed as one who wants to learn what others know or what there is to be known.

This latter point raises the question as to whether Socrates was a teacher. There is nothing odd or wrong in a teacher who assumes the role of a student and that of an inquirer. These two roles Socrates certainly fulfilled. Did he function as a teacher, namely, as one who has knowledge and imparts knowledge to others?

According to Jordan, Socrates did not fulfill the normal role we usually assign to a teacher, for "he does not claim to be imparting knowledge to others."⁷ We may have⁸ learnt a great deal from Socrates and he may have taught via the hidden curriculum. But his professed aim was not to impart or transfer a body of knowledge or a set of correct answers, or to cover a prescribed programme of studies. According to Perkinson's interpretation of the Socratic approach (interpretation which relies heavily on the work of Popper), Socrates did not adhere to "the theory of recollection".⁹ Perkinson attributes to Socrates the view that knowledge is conjectural--"as guesses that people make, theories and skills they create"; we create our knowledge and therefore "knowledge is not received".¹⁰ And if knowledge is not received, then the teacher cannot impart knowledge to others. This interpretation supports Jordan's claim.

Although the ordinary Athenian associated him with the Sophists, historically Socrates contrasts sharply with the Sophists. In fact he distrusted and opposed them for they claimed to know everything and spent their time touring the Greek world explaining what they claimed to be the truth and accepting exorbitant fees for their services. They used rhetoric to persuade others of their views irrespective of the truth of their claims. Socrates rejected this vehemently. In contrast, Socrates' starting point was ignorance--admitting that he knew nothing; his method of searching for the truth was to ask questions, to examine a position and replies in dialogue with others, and to use ordinary discourse. Moreover, he discoursed with anyone: "all sorts and conditions, from school boys to elderly capitalists, from orthodox middle-of-the-road citizens to extremists, friends and enemies, critics and admirers, the famous and the obscure, prostitutes and politicians, artists and soldiers, average Athenians and famous visitors."¹¹

Let us return to our question: Did Socrates fulfill the role of a teacher? If by a teacher we mean one who knows something and whose role is simply to impart or transfer that knowledge explicitly and directly to others, then we can conclude that Socrates was not a teacher. On the other hand, if by a teacher we mean one who helps others arrive at the truth through inquiry, then Socrates can be referred to as a teacher--one who, in Perkinson's words, "creates an educative environment" and provides "a critical response or critical feedback."¹² Of course, one can envisage oneself as a teacher in the former sense, but also, at times, adopting the role of an inquirer. There is nothing in the¹³ former model of a teacher that precludes one from being also an inquirer and a student. A teacher, for example, might not know the truth with regard to a particular question or issue; he or she might state this limitation and inquire further. Given his or her experience, sensitivity, imagination, and common sense a teacher might have formed a position with regard to a certain issue. Again, there is nothing which hinders him or her from

critically examining and discussing such a view with a Socratic sense of inquiry. The two roles of the teacher are not necessarily always in opposition. As Dewey stated: "The plan [i.e., educational scheme] . . . is a co-operative enterprise, not a dictation. The teacher's suggestion is not a mold for a cast-iron result but is a starting-point to be developed into a plan through contributions from experience of all engaged in the learning process. The development occurs through reciprocal give-and-take, the teacher taking but not being afraid also to give."¹⁴ It depends on the teacher's attitude and on the content being imparted or under consideration.¹⁵

At any rate, the point with regard to Socrates himself is that he did not see himself as one who directly imparts knowledge to others. As he declares in the Apology, "The fact is that there is nothing in any of the charges, and if you have heard anyone say that I try to educate people and charge a fee, there is no truth in that either. I wish that there were, because I think it is a fine thing if a man is qualified to teach."¹⁶ Socrates' notion of teaching corresponds to the first model of a teacher identified earlier.¹⁷ He does not seem to be, in principle, against such a role of the teacher. If one really knows then there is nothing wrong in imparting that knowledge. He thinks that he is not qualified to teach for as he states in another part of the Apology he does not possess wisdom. And so he continues to go "about the world . . . and search and make enquiry into the wisdom of anyone, whether citizen or stranger, who appears to be wise; and if he is not wise, then in vindication of the oracle I show him that he is not wise . . ."¹⁸

But did Socrates teach? In a sense he did but from the perspective of one who is inquiring rather than simply informing. He listens to what one has to say, carefully points out assumptions, shows inconsistencies, demands clarifications and better examples, questions, compares point-of-views, helps one make the implicit explicit, gives counter examples and explores alternative answers. But he fails to explicitly furnish a correct answer although he frequently shows that a certain reply or position is not correct. This does not mean that one ought not to try to formulate an answer. Coming up with an answer is the end although this task is arduous and on-going. Socrates does not defend scepticism¹⁹ but he indicates that we need to be cautious in formulating our views.

In brief, one can say that the Socratic Method is a method of rational inquiry which aims at identifying and establishing the true nature of things. The starting point of this inquiry does not have to be some esoteric issue. For Socrates the starting point was normally a casual question about something that was usually regarded as beyond question and frequently a question or issue raised by one of the other people participating in the discussion. The initial position is clarified, and tested by a series of questions and answers that arise from the participants in a discussion. If the initial position "fails" this examination, other positions are put forth and likewise examined, and this procedure goes on until some conclusion is reached. The direction of the inquiry is determined by the nature of the question asked or the problem posed and by the kind of replies and further questions that arise in the inquiry. No determinate or pre-established path channels the direction of the discourse.

SECTION B

In the second section of the paper I will focus on some issues that arise from the previous discussion of the Socratic Method and indicate some possible implications or recommendations that relate to the practice of doing philosophy with children.

(i) Facts and the Socratic Approach

In the Phaedo²⁰ Socrates explains why he deserted his early studies in natural science for an investigation into human problems and questions of human conduct--ordinary, public problems and questions of common concern ranging from bringing suit against a close relative for murder to how to make friends and treat children.²¹ If the inquiry

followed by Socrates is an open inquiry, would it be appropriate to discuss factual statements or statements that purport to communicate a fact when dealing with these kind of questions, concerns and subjects? At face value the reply seems to be in the negative: What is the point of discussing things that are known to be the case (in contrast to discussing things or issues about facts)?

When one is sincerely searching for the truth and has reached the stage of knowing what is the case, then, it would not seem meaningful to entertain further discussion. Moreover, one can argue that the notion of discussion conceptually precludes the discussion of facts as one can only discuss things that are not yet settled, or things that raise differing viewpoints or can be treated from different positions.

Some educationists have tended to associate the practice of dealing with facts with "traditional" or "transmission" pedagogy which, it is claimed, is based on a "mechanistic world-view"--a view which has been described as admitting of an objective reality which "underwrites the related concepts of 'truth' and 'fact'."²² This view, according to Neilsen, promotes "a pedagogy which places an overwhelming emphasis on teaching and considerable faith in direct instruction . . . as the chief means of transmitting facts, skills and procedures . . ."²³ Such a perspective is also frequently associated with "closed systems" in education. Within this perspective the curriculum is seen as consisting of "a body of knowledge, subject matter, information, or skills to be acquired."²⁴ From the "mechanistic world-view" one may get the impression that dealing with facts is exempt from open-ended inquiry. Can one, however, adopt the Socratic approach when dealing with facts, and how?

Socratic inquiry, that is, the rational inquiry which aims at identifying and establishing the nature of things, presupposes (i) a commitment to the search for "truth", and (ii) the attitude of being willing to change one's views if evidence shows otherwise. This inquiry, therefore, is a process in which one tries to confirm or establish something that one believes to be the case. The extent to which one can meaningfully engage in this process depends on the nature of the thing, answer, fact, view, "truth", or statement one holds or is inquiring about.

Consider these two examples: (i) Valletta is the capital city of Malta, and (ii) Drinking 5 cups of coffee daily is unhealthy for a person suffering from high blood pressure. [Humans cannot contract AIDS from mosquito bites. Ocean incineration is not a health hazard. There are no flaws in Nova Scotia's legal system]. These two examples may be held to be true. However, even if one holds (i) and (ii) to be the case, the examples differ: (i) does not call for serious discussion; (ii) does. Valletta has been the capital city of Malta since it was founded in the late 16th century. Once this fact is known, it does not make sense to engage in discussion which deals with alternative answers or possible points-of-view. Given that one knows that Valletta is the capital city of Malta, it makes no sense to ask "Is Sliema the capital city of Malta?"

Example (ii) allows for meaningful and serious discussion. At times, such discussions may be even called for even if one thinks that (ii) is the case. (ii) allows us to engage in further discussions that consider alternative views even if no new evidence has yet been provided. The question for which (ii) is given as a reply, of its very nature, admits further discussion whether or not one's intention or reason for raising the was to seek information or to verify what one thinks is the case with regard to the issue raised. In short, example (i) is an example of what one might label "factual stipulations"; example (ii) is not and therefore further investigation about the truth or falsity of statements of this kind would not be superfluous.

My reply to the initial question, then, is that there are cases that deal with "facts" which can be discussed following the spirit of Socrates. In other words, one can discuss anything socratically, as long as one is dealing with a controversial matter--a matter about which, as Dearden puts it, "contrary views can be held . . . without those views being

contrary to reason."²⁶ And as Dearden argues, controversial issues arise not only in matters relating to values but also with regard to "empirically factual matters".²⁷ (Dearden also argues that there are value issues which are not controversial). What we need to recall with regard to philosophical discussions with children is that these could deal both with value questions and with factual issues of the second type identified above. Moreover, facts of the first type could be used as a starting point to a philosophical discussion. Considering the statement "Valletta is the capital city of Malta" might lead to other questions, such as "On what criteria is a city chosen to be the capital city of a country?", "Who should establish these criteria?".

These questions can be dealt with philosophically. In other words, there might be good pedagogical reasons for considering factual statements of the first sort even in philosophy-for-children sessions.

(ii) The Socratic Fallacy

In his widely known paper "Plato's Euthyphro",²⁸ Geach charges Socrates with a mistake which he labels "the Socratic Fallacy". Geach attributes to Socrates the following two views: (A) If one does not know the definition of X then (i) one cannot know anything about X and (ii) one cannot know that any X is an X; (B) One cannot arrive at a definition of X by giving examples of X. R. Robinson and A. Flew have attributed similar views to Socrates.²⁹ Santas and more recently J. Beversluis have attempted to show that Socrates could not have held the views expressed in (A) and (B) above.³⁰ They agree, however, that the moves in (A) and (B) are fallacious.

Whether or not Socrates really committed this fallacy is irrelevant to philosophy for children; what is important is not to commit the fallacy. It would be good practical advice, therefore, even in philosophical discussions with children, to move beyond issues related merely to meaning. One ought not to give the impression that,³¹ unless one has given and supported a full-fledged definition (in the Socratic sense), then, one is unable or ought not to move the discussion further. One does at times know what something is even if one cannot yet provide a definition for it. It is important to distinguish between knowing what something is and knowing how to define what something is. Knowing that X is an X does not entail that one knows how to define X. I am not suggesting that issues of clarification of concepts are not philosophical or that one should not encourage these kinds of inquiries with children. My point is that one can hold a meaningful philosophical discussion about X even if one has not yet reached the stage of offering the kind of definition that Socrates demanded.

This point does not arise simply from attempting to avoid the pitfalls of the "Socratic Fallacy". It arises from the view which encourages the need to discuss not just definitions, but substantial philosophical issues and their practical implications. It would be a travesty simply to discuss meanings of moral terms--'freedom', 'responsibility', 'choice',--without, for example, investigating the implication of the fact that there are situations in which we are free or not free. One needs to discuss what, for example, is to count as 'pornography', or what is meant by 'confidentiality', but one also urgently needs to discuss and give reasons for statements like "violent pornography is bad" or "medical doctors ought not to reveal the identity of AIDS patients".

Discussing particular instances of X (e.g., an alleged case of violent pornography), or possible particular instances of X and considering the implications (e.g., moral or political ones) of this thing if it had qualities A, B, C rather than C, D, E, may in itself help one arriving at a "definition" of X as well as defending some substantial view about X. Concerns of clarification are not always removed from those of justification or providing reasons. In order to be able to engage in the latter processes, one needs to have diagnosed or identified that X is of that kind, but this identification is different from either knowing the definition of X or being able to give a formal definition of X.

Geach might have been at fault in attributing the fallacious moves identified in (A) and (B) above to Socrates. But, it seems to me, he is correct in holding that "we know heaps of things without being able to define the terms in which we express our knowledge. Formal definitions are only one way of elucidating terms; a set of examples may in a given case be more useful than a formal definition."³² With regard to the second part of the "Socratic Fallacy", in doing philosophy with children, then, starting with a set of examples of the issue in question is an appropriate strategy. Children are extremely fond of giving examples even excellent ones, but they do tend to overdo this practice. In leading philosophical discussions with children one needs to show the point of offering examples, and if necessary also move the session beyond merely producing a list of examples or a list of the ordinary usage of terms in question. Examples can help us arrive at a definition or clarify an issue. In philosophy, however, one is obliged to more than give examples and define or clarify an issue.

(iii) Questions, Answers and Philosophy-for-Children Discussions

Leonard Nelson describes the Socratic Method as "the art of teaching not philosophy but philosophizing, the art not of teaching about philosophy but of making philosophers of the students."³³ This description is very similar to Kant's dictum: "You will not learn from me philosophy, but how to philosophize, not thought to repeat, but how to think. Think for yourselves, inquire for yourselves, stand on your own feet." Socrates instigated philosophical discussion via questions. "Nothing is more characteristic of Socrates", Santas claims, "than talking, and nothing is more characteristic of his talk than asking questions. . . . when Socrates is not talking, he is probably holding a silent question-and answer session with himself."³⁴ There is no doubt that Socrates employed a questioning approach. But what kind of questions and in what context? Using a questioning and discussion approach does not necessarily imply that one is employing the Socratic Method or following the Socratic spirit. The dialogue between Socrates and the slave-boy in the Meno has been frequently offered as an example of the Socratic Method. Steven M. Cahn refers to this incident as a "paradigm case of what has come to be known as Socratic questioning."³⁵ Flew also refers to this instance as an example of the Socratic Method--in fact it is the only example he gives in the entry on the Socratic Method in the Dictionary of Philosophy.³⁶ J.T. Dillon in Research on Questioning and Discussion distinguishes between 'Recitation' and 'Discussion'.³⁷ He defines recitation as "a rubric covering various activities called review, drill, quiz, guided discovery, inquiry teaching, Socratic method", and discussion as "group interaction not of this [recitation's] character . . . [it] covers various activities in which teacher and students 'discuss' what they don't know."³⁸ Although Dillon makes no reference to the slave-boy incident, it seems that his notion of the Socratic Method would be similar to the one identified by Cahn and Flew given that he includes it under the category of 'Recitation'.

But are the kind of questions and context we encounter in the slave-boy incident really compatible with the Socratic Method? Jordan argues that there is no justification for "calling a method of teaching that resembled Socrates' handling of the slave, Socratic Method."³⁹ In the same article, Jordan also claims that the Socratic Method "is simply not useful when the proper answer to questions are already known."⁴⁰ It is the case, then, that questions and discussions have to be about things that are "up for grabs"? Can one be following the Socratic Method if one (the leader of discussion) has an answer to the question at hand?

Santas identifies 2 major contexts in which one can ask questions: (I) "the information-seeking' context' or 'the answer-seeking' context"; (II) "the teaching' context" or 'examining-a-candidate' context.⁴¹ Under (II) he identifies 2 sub-species: (IIa), "the know-it respondent' context", and (IIb), "the don't-know respondent' context."⁴² His major conclusions are that Socrates asks questions in all these contexts and shifts back

and forth from one context to another, and that (IIa) is Socrates' most common context.

In (I) the questioner does not know the answer but is seeking one. Answers sought could be either in the form of information or "in the nature of discoveries."⁴³ According to Santas, (II), "the teaching' context", is characterized by the fact that the questioner knows the answer since the questioner wants to find out whether or not the students know the answer. In the sub-species (IIa) the respondent gives an incorrect answer but he or she believes that he or she is correct. In this context the questioner may ask more questions to try and make the respondent aware that the answer is incorrect. In (IIb), the respondent knows the answer "implicitly" or "potentially".⁴⁴ In this context the questioner asks the timid respondent questions to which the respondent knows the answer for and which help him or her arrive at the answer to the original question.

Santas illustrates his distinctions (which he later applies to Socrates' own case) with the following example: "Which way is Larissa relative to Athens, north or south?"⁴⁵ In context (I), the question is, for example, asked by a traveller; in context (II) the question is asked in a geography exam.

At least two comments are called for. First, the question Santas offers is not the kind of question that Socrates typically dealt with in his discussions or inquiry; instead it is a factual question whose answer is "an easily ascertainable fact." Second, Socrates did not ask questions in an examination context, at least not in our sense of examination context, i.e., where a teacher, having taught subject X to a group of students, then formally examines the students to see what they learnt. In short, Santas has misrepresented the context in which Socrates asks questions. And this is a central point to consider since according to Santas 'the teaching' context (IIa) is the most common context in which Socrates asked questions.

If one were to adhere to Santas' classification and explanation of the different contexts in which questions may be asked, it would follow that the majority of questions that Socrates asked were ones to which he knew the answer--since (IIa) is a sub-species of (II) and a necessary quality of (II), according to Santas, is that the questioner knows the answer. I am not challenging the fact that Socrates frequently asked questions in situations where the respondent/s gave an incorrect answer/s although he or she did not believe so. Nor am I denying that in these situations Socrates detected incorrect answers and asked further questions to make the respondent aware of his or her incorrect answer by pointing out, for example, an inconsistency, a contradiction, vagueness or incompleteness or by offering a counter-example. But none of this necessarily implies that Socrates knew the answer to the question at hand. Detecting incorrect answers and helping someone become aware of a mistake does not entail that one has the answer. Socrates, after all, believed that the process of examining alternative views and testing their validity was part of the larger process of arriving at the truth. Examining a respondent's answer in Socrates' way does not require that the "examiner" knows the correct answer to the substantive issue at hand. The examiner, however, does have to follow the basic rules of logic. If my interpretation is correct, it follows that (IIa) is not always a sub-species of (II).

It is interesting to note Santas' remark with regard to (IIb) as it applies to Socrates: "There are very few examples of 'don't know respondent' context, mostly with Socrates [i] as the respondent or [ii] both the questioner and the respondent . . ." ⁴⁶ Again, following Santas' own explanation of (IIb), in the case of [i] since Socrates is the respondent then he only has the answer "potentially" or "implicitly" and therefore Socrates is not aware of the answer. What about [ii]? In this case, Socrates ought to have known the answer.

If my analysis of Santas' interpretation of Socrates and my critique of his interpretation are correct, then in most contexts either Socrates did not know the answer (there is no doubt about this with regard to context (I)) or it is uncertain whether he has the answer or not (as in the case of (IIa)). However, one needs to add that in the latter

instance, if Socrates did believe he had the answer, then one could legitimately charge him with being insincere since he frequently claimed that he is not wise.

One might get the impression that I am trying to defend either the view that Socrates did not know anything or that he did not hold any views or the position that if one has an answer to a question then one cannot follow the Socratic approach with regard to this question. However, such an impression would not be true.

A point of clarification is needed at this stage. When Socrates claimed that he is not wise or that he is ignorant, he did not mean to say that he did not know anything (or that he is stupid). One needs to distinguish between, on the one hand, knowing facts and being aware of basic logical principles (or truths) and, on the other hand, knowing a definition in the Socratic sense.

What are some of the things that Socrates must have known? Socrates rejected several definitions offered by the other participants in discussions by (a) offering counter-examples that point to the limitations or vacuousness of the definition, or (b) detecting a contradiction which arose from the definition and some other belief held by the person who offered the definition. Socrates rejected definitions offered that did not fit with his concept of a "good definition". Therefore, one could safely conclude that Socrates was aware of the basic logical principles (he definitely manifested several logical skills) and the criteria of a "good definition." In fact, there are some instances where Socrates himself offers definitions.⁴⁷

Although Socrates did not offer any definite answer or definitions to questions such as "What is piety?", his interjections in discussions dealing with these kind of issues indicate that he knew what to focus on. He had a feeling for the problem at hand--a feeling which led him to ask certain questions aimed at clarifying and resolving the issue. He knew the appropriate questions to ask and when to ask them; he knew that asking certain questions would lead to further inquiry, new aspects and directions, and new questions. In this respect, he would have agreed with Lonergan's view that the best reply to a question is one that leads to more questions.

One might argue that these examples are simply formal ones--that Socrates did not know the answer to substantial questions dealing with, for example piety and virtue. This might be the case. However, not knowing the answer does not imply that Socrates did not have a view or a belief or opinion about these issues. Not having the answer does not preclude one from having a plausible view. In one of the dialogues, Socrates says to Critias "you come to me as though I professed to know about the questions which I ask . . . Whereas the fact is that I am inquiring with you into the truth of that which is advanced from time to time, just because I do not know; and when I have inquired, I will say whether I agree with you or not. Please then allow me time to reflect."⁴⁸ After reflecting he did say whether or not he agreed with a view put forth. And this, by implication committed him to holding a view which might have formed the basis of an answer to the question under consideration.

If one has an answer or if one has formed a view with regard to a certain issue, could one still follow the Socratic approach? Could one still engage in fruitful discussion? Or, should one simply express one's view and retreat? It seems to me that one could still meaningfully follow the Socratic approach. However, a certain attitude is called for: one has to be willing to submit one's answer to further investigation if new evidence or if some counter-example is offered. Livingstone describes Socrates' procedure as follows: "Socrates was a severe critic of his own opinions as of other people's, and even if he advanced a theory of his own he would probably throw that too into the melting-pot . . . Socrates anchors himself to a general principle before he argues, though he is always ready to raise his anchor, if the holding proves bad."⁴⁹ If one is going to follow the Socratic approach, it is crucial that one be willing to revise, amend or change one's view if this is called for.

If one is going to follow the Socratic ideal, the foregoing discussion indicates at least two implications for doing philosophy with children: First, the teacher or the person who is going to lead the discussion needs to know some things. In this respect, not everyone can or ought to lead a philosophy-for-children discussion. Second, the fact that one has formed a view or answer to a philosophical issue does not preclude one from leading and engaging in a philosophy-with-children discussion. What needs to be emphasized is the attitude one takes toward that answer or view. There are certain attitudes or ways of dealing with a view which teachers doing philosophy with children (all teachers!) ought to avoid: prohibiting an examination of other views, discouraging criticism of the teacher's view (whether or not the teacher has yet made his or her view public), and luring the students to hold a certain view (even if this is done by further questioning).

This point leads us to consider the role of the teacher if one intends to follow the Socratic Method in philosophy-with-children discussions. Aspects of this role will be dealt with in the next sub-section.

(iv) Role of the Teacher

Several questions arise with regard to the role of the teacher in philosophy-with-children discussions. For example: Should a teacher be "neutral"? Should a teacher express his or her views at all? To what extent should a teacher follow the interests of the students, or, should the interests of the students be the only concern in deciding what topic to discuss and how to proceed in discussing a selected topic? Is everyone's point of view worth hearing and discussing? Is anything one says in a discussion of equal value? Should a teacher intervene in a discussion? Should a teacher "evaluate" the views, opinions, and reasons expressed in the discussion? It would go beyond the purpose of this paper to discuss in detail all these questions though they are the kind that practitioners of philosophy with children have to deal with. I have attempted to deal briefly with these questions by grouping them under two headings: "neutrality" and "interests and anything goes".

Neutrality

Educationists have distinguished between procedural and substantive neutrality. This distinction is usually introduced in order to defend the view that teachers ought to be neutral in the latter but not the former sense. According to this view, teachers ought to remain "neutral", that is, "uncommitted, favouring neither side to a dispute,"⁵⁰ with regard to substantial issues such as the existence of God, free will and determinism, the nature of justice and virtue, or rights and duties. This is not to say that teachers ought not to have views of their own with regard to these matters. The point is that they ought not to make them known to the students lest their views discourage students from inquiring further into these issues or forming their own views, prevent students from expressing their views without fear and therefore curtail discussion, or encourage students blindly to accept the view expressed by the teacher (since students believe that teachers know best on any matter). The major concern, then, is that since substantive issues are very delicate, a teacher's expressed view might be seen as prejudging the issue and possibly leading to a form of indoctrination.

Some, like Robin Barrow, have argued that although one can conceptually distinguish between substantive and procedural neutrality, ultimately, in practice, interfering with "the presentation of the case of one party is to upset the credibility of its message . . . A suspension of procedural neutrality . . . sooner or later means an end to substantive neutrality too . . ." ⁵¹ Of course, one could retort that Barrow's view demonstrates that one ought to adopt also procedural neutrality: by adopting procedural neutrality one will eliminate interference with substantive neutrality. But as David Bridges, who in the final analysis still favours "neutrality", admits: "To adopt the strategy of procedural neutrality

in discussion is itself, to adopt, to demonstrate and quite possibly to promote a specific and substantive set of values."⁵²

As I have argued earlier, Socrates' claim to the lack of wisdom and knowledge did not preclude him from having a view or a position which he eventually shared with the other participants of the discussion. Socrates made his view known, for example, by rejecting definitions offered and by offering counter-examples. One needs to note, however, that Socrates did not express his view, whether explicitly or implicitly at the initial stage of an inquiry. In his search for truth Socrates did not want to eliminate or rule out the consideration of a view simply because it was different from his own. He listened and examined different positions before he actually stated where he stood with regard to the positions put forth. His approach called for a fair hearing of different, relevant positions irrespective of who was putting forth the view. Socrates fulfilled both the role of a moderator and co-participant.

This approach is very similar to the "impartial" role of the teacher that Barrow proposes. Impartiality, according to Barrow, is different from neutrality "in that one may openly espouse a view and yet remain impartial, for impartiality implies that one follows where the argument leads. [An impartial person] will assess discussion in terms of good reason rather than in terms of prejudices, popularity, or convenience."⁵³ An impartial person "will change his view, if the argument leads that way."⁵⁴ The impartial person, it seems to me, is different from the dogmatic moralizer in the sense that such a person accepts the attitude of open-mindedness which "can be adopted towards beliefs which we hold inasmuch as we remain willing to revise or reconsider them."⁵⁵ And as Williams Hare points out, this is the kind of attitude which Socrates, for example, is trying to encourage Meno to adopt when Socrates remarks: ". . . but to be sound it [a position] has to seem all right not only 'just now' but at this moment and in the future."⁵⁶

If in doing philosophy with children one is going to follow the Socratic approach, what is needed on the part of the teacher is a calculated impartiality rather than blind neutrality. This attitude has been suggested by Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan who state that impartiality involves seeing things from the point of view of both teacher and students, and going beyond one's perspective or situation "so as to be more objective and impartial judge of it."⁵⁷ They do not expect children "to be naturally objective and impartial", but children could learn to be so. Thus they argue that teachers ought to make this available to them by, among other things, "arranging situations in which they can try to talk objectively and impartially about their problems."⁵⁸ About any of their problems? And do we always have to start with their problems? To put it in other terms, should we start and deal with what interests the students?

Interests and Anything Goes

It was stated earlier in this paper that in the case of the discussions Socrates engaged in, normally the subject of the discussion arose from the participants themselves and the context. Socrates does not give the impression that he had a set agenda for the discussion. The starting point of a Socratic investigation is a question or a problem posed by a participant.⁵⁹ However, one would be misinterpreting Socrates if one were to suggest that throughout a discussion he focussed only on an issue or issues arising from an immediate concern or interest of a participant. Santas reminds us that "Socrates changes the subject from that of the original occasion; but the new subject has even greater common concern, though it is not perhaps as temporally immediate as the original occasion . . ."⁶⁰ Socrates does not get stuck with the original question simply because this is something which interests the participants. He intervenes by suggesting new questions which lead to a consideration of new issues, concerns and interests and which enlighten the original or primary question.

Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan stress that "classroom discussion should begin with the interests of the students, and that having children read a story is a way of creating an experience that will mobilize and crystallize their interests."⁶¹ Ronald Reed proposes not only that the students' interests should be dealt with in the discussion but also that their interests ought to play a more central role, by determining the starting point of the conversation.⁶² This strong emphasis on the interests of students, may seem to be at odds with Socrates' example. This is not necessarily the case.

Talk about interests can be misleading. One needs to distinguish between subjective and objective interests, or 'what interests X' and 'what is in the interest of X'. This conceptual distinction does not rule out the possibility that the object of the 2 kinds of 'interest' may be the same: a subjective and objective interest may be identical. However, when the object is not the same, the question one is faced with in the justificatory process is which of the 2 should take precedence. While not denying the importance of taking subjective interests into account, there are instances where one needs to consider whether the subjective interest ought to be the primary criterion for such decisions.⁶³ What about those cases, for example, where the topics that need to be discussed conflict with the interests of the students (as seen by the students)? May it not be the case that some things that initially seem uninteresting to us turn out to be very worthwhile and indeed interesting once we become engaged in them?

It seems to me, that Lipman et al.'s and Reed's view of the importance of interests is compatible with the Socratic approach, for they do not argue for the priority of interests unconditionally. Lipman et al. identify several tasks for the philosophy for children teacher. These include pointing out themes students fail to identify and including them in the agenda,⁶⁴ enlarging the students' perspectives by making them aware of alternative views through questioning,⁶⁵ encouraging "intellectual creativity as well as intellectual rigor",⁶⁶ guiding "the children gradually into a discussion of these [philosophical] themes",⁶⁷ directing "the discussion tactfully to another topic"⁶⁸ when a topic has been exhausted or when the discussion is no longer productive, and liberating "them from narrow-mindedness- by suggesting that there might very well be other possibilities to explore, and by helping them to identify and examine such alternative possibilities."⁶⁹

These examples are sufficient to establish that Lipman et al.'s insistence on interests is different from the romantic defence of students' interests which takes the form of such slogans as "the child should not do anything until he comes to the opinion--his own opinion--that it should be done" (A.S. Neill) or "every human being knows better than anyone else what he needs and wants" (J. Holt). Neither are they supporting the view defended by P.S. Wilson who stipulates that what is educationally worthwhile is identical to what interests students.⁷⁰

While it is pedagogically appropriate in doing philosophy with children, to start with an issue that the children themselves identify after reacting to a reading from a philosophical novel,⁷¹ one needs to keep in mind that since one's focus is on philosophical discussions, then the issues have to be of a philosophical import. In this respect, the participants (including the teacher) have to bear in mind what is philosophically relevant. While Socrates showed us that the philosophical procedure can be applied to almost any topic, Reed rightly declares that "A philosophy for children discussion should 'impose' a set of obligations on the members."⁷² These obligations, although they may conflict with the interests of the participants, have to take precedence if one is going to do philosophy at all. But as Judy Kyle has pointed out, the philosophy-for-children approach shifts the focus from either a purely subjective or a totally paternalistic notion of interests to a "concept of interests and experiences children would have if they could."⁷³ In other words, once the students are initiated into and understand the nature of doing philosophy,⁷⁴ they will raise issues that are both philosophically relevant and of interest to them.

This outlook and approach has at least two crucial implications for the role of the

teacher. First, the teacher has to "demonstrate" the philosophical procedures through his or her actions, attitudes, questions and responses. This, at times, calls for "an intervention" on the part of the teacher. Second, the teacher (as well as the other participants)--like Socrates--has to give all the participants the opportunity to air their views and concerns with regard to the issue being discussed⁷⁵ since anyone's point of view may eventually contribute to the progress of the discussion. This, however, does not mean that anything anyone says is necessarily of equal value. Being willing to entertain different points of view is different from admitting that any view will do. There is a difference between, on the one hand, encouraging people to express their views, give reasons for them, and respect the views of others, and, on the other hand, stating that every view--whatever that view happens to be--is equally acceptable. As Amy Gutman stresses: "Treating every moral opinion as equally worthy encourages children in the false subjectivism that 'I have my opinion and you have yours and who's to say who's right?'"⁷⁶ This moral understanding does not take the demand of democratic justice seriously.⁷⁶ But both the Socratic approach and the philosophy for children approach reject "false subjectivism." If Socrates had accepted this kind of subjectivism, it would have made no sense for him, to engage in discussion which sought to define the true nature of things.⁷⁷ In the same vein as that of Socrates, Sharp argues that communities of inquiry are not condemned to either subjectivism or relativism.⁷⁸ And Lipman et al⁷⁹ conclude that "our stress upon logic and inquiry is meant to counter this subjectivism."

One final point. It seems to me that this approach requires that the teacher and the students evaluate the views expressed in discussion. I am not suggesting that the participants ought scrupulously to assess every single utterance. However, there has to be an evaluation of the discussion on philosophical grounds--for example, consistency, appropriateness, coherency--if one claims that one can determine whether or not philosophical progress was made in a discussion. Therefore, the participants have the responsibility to intervene and point out fallacious arguments, misinterpretations, or any other inadequacy. One needs to insist, however, that the intervention, which could take the form of a criticism, has to be made in a respectful and supportive manner. According to Perkinson, Socrates failed to create a supportive environment--"a caring environment, one in which pupils recognize that they are trusted, prized, accepted, even loved."⁸⁰ The philosophy-for-children approach should be able to create such a supportive environment by the formation of a community of inquiry. In this respect, this approach not only follows but improves the Socratic one.⁸¹

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ENDNOTES

¹ Jordan, J. A. (1968). Socratic teaching?. In Teachers College Record and Harvard Educational Review (Eds.), Problems and Issues in Contemporary Education (p.119). Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman. (Originally in Harvard Educational Review (Winter, 1963)).

² It is interesting to note that major "methods" text books have no reference to the Socratic Method. For example, see, Sanders, N. M. (1966). Classroom questions. New York: Harper and Row.; Gilstrap, R. L., & Martin, W. R. (1975). Current strategies for teachers. Pacific Palisades, CA: Goodyear.; Hyman, R. (1979). Strategic questioning. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.; Orlich, D. C., & et al. (1985). Teaching strategies (2nd ed.). Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath.; and McKeachie, W. J. (1986). Teaching tips (8th ed.). Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath.

³ Justus Buchler and William Hare have argued that the lecture method is not necessarily at odds with the discussion method. See Buchler, J. (1954). What is a discussion?. The Journal of General Education, 7(1), 7-17; and Hare, W. (1979). Open-mindedness and education. Montreal: McGill-Queen's. (pp. 103-128).

⁴ See, for example. Lipman, M., Sharp, A. M., & Oscanyan, F. S. (1980). Philosophy in the classroom (2nd ed.). Philadelphia: Temple University Press. (p. xiii).; Johnston, T. W. (1984). Philosophy for children: An approach to critical thinking. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation. (p. 19).; Sharp, A. M. (1984). Philosophical teaching as moral education. Journal of Moral Education, 13(1), 8.; Johnson, T. W. (1987). Philosophy for children and its critics. Educational Theory, 37(1), 68.; Sharp, A. M. (1987). What is a 'Community of Inquiry'?. Journal of Moral Education, 16(1), 40.; Walley, M. (1987). Unexamined lives: The case of philosophy in schools. British Journal of Educational Studies, 35(3), 279.

⁵ It is worth noting that Socrates' mother was a midwife, and that "Greek custom restricted the practice of midwifery to women past their own period of child-bearing . . ." Bowen, J. (1972). A history of western education (Vol. I). New York: St. Martin's. (p. 89).

⁶ Jordan, 120.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Socrates might be seen as teaching by his own example; by engaging in a dialogue with Socrates one might have learnt about the method Socrates used and the assumptions of rational inquiry implicit in his quest.

⁹ Perkinson, H. J. (1985). The Socratic approach to education today. Education Today, 35(1), 20.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Hight, G. (1950). The art of teaching. New York: Vintage. (p. 150).

¹² Perkinson, 22.

¹³ The function of an inquirer or a student, however, are not seen as an integral part of the role of the teacher, the role of a teacher and that of an inquirer or a student are not identical.

¹⁴ Dewey, J. (1963). Experience and education. New York: Macmillan. (p. 72).

¹⁵ This point will be discussed at greater length in Section B of this paper.

¹⁶ Apology, 19e.

¹⁷ Socrates might have been contrasting his activities with the teaching normally understood in ancient Greece, where a teacher recited a line from, for example, Homer and the student repeated the line. In that sense, obviously, the method of inquiry he used did not conform to the understanding of teaching in his days. See, McClellan, J. E. (1976). Philosophy of education. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. (p. 25).

18 Apology.

19 Perkinson, H. J. (1980). Since Socrates. New York: Longman. Perkinson argues that "rather than skepticism and nihilism, Socrates' negative approach leads to optimism and progress." (10).

20 Phaedo, 96a.

21 Santas, G. X. (1979). Socrates. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. (p. 68).; and Livingstone, R. W. (1961). Portrait of Socrates. London: Oxford University. (p. xx).

22 Neilsen, A. R. (1989). Critical thinking and reading: Empowering learners to think and act. Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, p. 3.

23 Ibid., 4.

24 Combs, A. W. (1982). A personal approach to teaching. Boston: Allyn and Bacon. (p. 145).

25 Hare, W. (1974). The concept of discussion. Kansas Studies in Education, 23(1), 7.

26 Dearden, R. F. (1981). Controversial issues and the curriculum. Journal of Curriculum Studies, 13(1), 38.

By 'reason' Dearden does not mean "Something timeless and unhistorical but the body of public knowledge, criteria of truth, critical standards and verification procedures which at any given time has been so far developed." (38).

27 Dearden, 39.

28 Geach, P. T. (1966). Plato's Euthphro. The Monist, 50(3).

29 Robinson, R. (1953). Plato's earlier dialectic (2nd ed.). Oxford University.; and Flew, A. (1979). Philosophy: An introduction. Hodder and Stoughton.

30 Santas, Socrates; and Beversluis, J. (1987). Does Socrates commit the Socratic fallacy?. American Philosophical Quarterly, 24(3).

31 Flew describes such a definition as follows: ". . . the definition is required to provide: not just a rough and ready summary of the present usage of what may be in some ways a vague term; but a clearcut and correct determination of how it should be applied in all possible cases--including all marginal cases and cases involving unforeseen and perhaps unforeseeable novelties." (5).

32 Geach, 371.

33 Nelson, L. (1949). Socratic method and critical philosophy: Selected essays. New Haven, CT: Yale University. (p. 1).

34 Santas, 59.

- 35 Cahn, S. M. (1970). The philosophical foundations of education. New York: Harper and Row. (p. 5).
- 36 Flew, A. (1983). A dictionary of philosophy. London: Macmillan. (p. 330).
- 37 Dillon, J. T. (1984, November). Research on questioning and discussion. Educational Leadership.
- 38 Ibid., 51.
- 39 Jordan, 121.
- 40 Ibid., 125.
- 41 Santas, 68-9.
- 42 Ibid., 69.
- 43 Ibid., 71.
- 44 Ibid., 69.
- 45 Ibid., 68.
- 46 Ibid., 70.
- 47 See, Santas, 100.
- 48 Charmides, 165c.
- 49 Livingstone, xxiv and xxxi.
- 50 Barrow, R. (1981). The philosophy of schooling. Brighton, Sussex: Wheatsheaf. (p. 101).
- 51 Ibid., 102.
- 52 Bridges, D. (1979). Education, democracy and discussion. Berks, U.K.: NFER. (p. 124).
- 53 Barrow, 102.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Hare, W. (1985). In defence of open-mindedness. Montreal: McGill-Queen's. (p. 94).
- 56 Meno, 89c.
- 57 Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 70.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 As Rosalyn S. Sherman puts it: "For the most part, Socrates joined and transformed discussions already in progress, or initiated a particular line of discussion when requested

to do so by fellow conversants. Rarely did he initiate discussion ex nihilo. (Even the discussion with Euthphro concerning the nature of piety--a discussion in which Euthphro seems reluctant to engage--evolves naturally out of earlier conversation initiated by Euthphro.) Is it possible to teach socratically?. Thinking (1986), 6(4), 29.

⁶⁰ Santas, 68.

⁶¹ Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 113.

⁶² Reed, R. (1985). Discussing philosophy with children: Aims and methods. Teaching Philosophy, 8(3), 229-34.

⁶³ Eamonn Callan notes: "The possibility of undesirable interests is sufficient to undermine the view that interest should be the sole determinant of curriculum aims and content; but it cannot justify complacency concerning our current practices in curriculum decision-making." Interests and the curriculum. British Journal of Educational Studies (1983), 31(1), 41-51.

⁶⁴ Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 83 and 113.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 83.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 89-90.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 91.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 106.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 68.

⁷⁰ Wilson, P. S. (1971). Interest and discipline in education. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

⁷¹ One might want to add that this is also morally appropriate. If, as Callan argues, "the individual's personal interests constitute the heart of consciousness because it is only through them that life acquires subjective meaning; and hence moral respect must involve a concern that these be adequately expressed . . .5" ("Interests and the Curriculum" 44-45), then, one might contend that this provides us with a moral justification for starting a discussion with the interests of the students.

⁷² Reed, 230.

⁷³ Kyle, J. (1976). Philosophy for children. Unpublished master's thesis, McGill University, Montreal, Canada. (p. 136).

⁷⁴ Donald Arnstine and Barbara Arnstine defend a similar notion of interests: "By interest, we simply mean something that can be done--an activity, or a goal that requires an activity for its attainment. Thus we are not concerned here with interest as merely a willingness to pay attention, or as some private advantage or public concern, as is meant when we say that a thing is "in her interest," or "in the public interest." Interest simply means here the things which people willingly and voluntarily do, and which can be enhanced by participation in a group." Teaching democracy through participation: The

crucial role of student interest. The Educational Forum (1987), 51(4), 382.

75 If this were not the case, a teacher would not be encouraging and "demonstrating" the philosophical procedures.

76 Gutman, A. (1987). Democratic education. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University. (p. 75).

77 For an elaboration of this point see, Siegel, H. (1986). Relativism, truth and incoherence. Synthese, 68, 225-59.

78 Sharp, 39.

79 Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 163.

80 Perkinson, 24.

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