Martha Nussbaum, Cultivating Humanity, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998

CHAPTER ONE

Socratic Self-Examination

> If I tell you that this is the greatest good for a human being, to engage every day in arguments about virtue and the other things you have heard me talk about, examining both myself and others, and if I tell you that the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being, you will be even less likely to believe what I am saying. But that's the way it is, gentlemen, as I claim, though it's not easy to convince you of it.
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> Socrates, in Plato, *Apology* 38A

The Old Education, in Aristophanes' portrait, acculturated young citizens to traditional values. They learned to internalize and to love their traditions, and they were discouraged from questioning them. As Aristophanes sees it, the most dangerous opponent of this Old Education is Socrates, whose questions subvert the authority of tradition, who recognizes no authority but that of reason, asking even the gods to give a reasoned account of their preferences and commands. Socrates' "Think-Academy" is depicted as a source of civic corruption, where young people learn to justify beating their parents. This fictional attack fed a real suspicion of the Socratic way of life. Athenian leaders, unsettled at the idea that young people would search for arguments to justify their beliefs rather than simply following parents and civic authorities, blamed Socrates for the cultural disharmony they sensed around them. Charged with corrupting the young, he eventually forfeited his life.

The ancient debate between Socrates and his enemies is of value for our present educational controversies. Like Socrates, our colleges and universities are being charged with corruption of the young. Seeing young people emerge from modern "Think-Academies" with many challenges to tradi-

tional thinking—about women, about race, about social justice, about patriotism—social conservatives of many kinds have suggested that these universities are homes for the corrupt thinking of a radical elite whose ultimate aim is the subversion of the social fabric.[1] Once again an education that promotes acculturation to the time-honored traditions of "Western Civilization" is being defended against a more Socratic education that insists on teaching students to think for themselves. At institutions of the most varied sorts, students are indeed asking questions and challenging the authority of tradition.

At Notre Dame University in South Bend, Indiana, students in a course on science and human values, taught by philosopher Philip Quinn, fulfill the institution's two-semester philosophy requirement. Quinn, a Catholic who left Brown University for Notre Dame because he wished to teach in a Catholic institution, sees the requirement as a way of getting even the most passive students to think for themselves and to argue for their beliefs. Most students in the class say that the philosophy requirement has made them better Catholics by forcing them to defend their choices with arguments. Several students dissent. Speaking for this group, Kevin Janicki, a tall, athletic blond man, says that philosophy has led him to question his Catholic faith by forcing him to notice how little rational argument is in evidence when the university administration handles issues relating to women and homosexuality. They ask you to take philosophy and ask questions, and then they ask you to obey authority and to ask no questions. He stands in the back of the crowded classroom puzzled.

At Belmont University, a Baptist institution in Nashville, Tennessee, I spend the day talking about ancient Greek ethics to a group of remarkably eager and well-informed students.[2] Then I go over to Professor Ginger Justus' house for an informal supper with philosophy majors. Justus, a gifted young philosophy teacher, greets the students warmly; her voice crackles with humor. As we all sit around on the floor eating, the students tell me of their decision to major in philosophy at a time when that department has recently won permission to separate itself from the religion department. They love what they are doing, they tell me, but many of their friends have dropped them. They are under strong parental pressure not to associate with them, since philosophy majors are thought to be tainted by "secular humanism."

At Brown University just before Christmas I meet with my three senior

honors thesis advisees for 1995. Amy Meselson is writing about the Stoics and Aristotle on free will and determinism. She trudges in early to discuss the twenty single-spaced pages of meticulous textual analysis she has given me that morning. Nicole Li, a second-generation citizen of Chinese and British origins, is writing about women and revenge, connecting ancient Greek accounts with modern ethical and legal arguments. She brings me a new book on justifiable homicide, asking me to be sure to read it in the next two days (along with two others she gave me the week before) so that she can take them all home to Seattle for vacation. Liliana Garcés is writing about philosophical and religious arguments for and against abortion in her native country of Colombia, from which she emigrated to the United States at age twelve, speaking no English. (Her mother worked as a janitor to send her through parochial schools, and now works as a beautician.) A serene, lucid woman with a lightly accented voice (and a 4.0 average in philosophy), Liliana is about to return to Medellín to conduct interviews over the vacation. We go over her interview questions before discussing her law school application. Two of these three thesis topics would have been unknown in an American philosophy program even fifteen years ago. And yet those two are just as much in the ancient Greek tradition as the first one—like the writings of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius in the tradition of critical reflection stemming from Socrates, applying concepts from philosophy to the analysis and criticism of one's own culture.

At the Cambridge health club, Billy Tucker has received a good grade in his first philosophy test, about Socrates and his arguments. As we talk across the counter, he exudes pride and enthusiasm. He thought philosophy was for people in the Ivy League, and now he knows he can do it. Krishna Mallick has been asking them to use the techniques they learned in thinking about Socrates to analyze arguments in the newspaper. Tucker reports that he is detecting lots of fallacies. Next week they will stage a classroom debate about Dr. Kevorkian and the morality of his conduct. Tucker is surprised that he was asked to find arguments for a position that he does not hold.

Philosophical questioning arises wherever people are. These students are discovering that philosophy is not an abstract, remote discipline, but one that is woven, as Socrates' arguments were woven, into the fabric of their daily lives, their discussions of life and death, abortion and revenge, institutional justice and religion. Philosophy breaks out wherever people are encouraged to think for themselves, questioning in a Socratic way. For all

these students, philosophy supplies something that formerly was lacking—an active control or grasp of questions, the ability to make distinctions, a style of interaction that does not rest on mere assertion and counterassertion—all of which they find important to their lives with themselves and one another.

In colleges and universities around the country, students are following Socrates, questioning their views to discover how far they survive the test of argument. Although Socratic procedures have been familiar for a long time in basic philosophy courses, philosophy is now reaching a far larger number of students than it did fifty years ago, students of all classes and backgrounds and religious origins. And philosophy, which at one time was taught as a remote and abstract discipline, is increasingly being linked to the analysis and criticism of current events and ideas. Instead of learning logical analysis in a vacuum, students now learn to dissect the arguments they find in newspapers, to argue about current controversies in medicine and law and sports, to think critically about the foundations of their political and even religious views.

To parents in contemporary America, as to parents in the time of Socrates, such developments can appear very unsettling. Argument seems like a cold strange invader into the habits of the home. The father in Aristophanes came home one day to encounter an argument in favor of father-beating. The parents of the philosophy majors at Belmont may encounter "secular humanism" at the end of the semester, where previously there had been traditional Christianity. Nicole Li's parents send her to Brown and find her making arguments in defense of women who take extralegal revenge against their abusers. The Socratic emphasis on reason seems not only subversive but also cold. To kind and affectionate people, it can seem insulting to demand an argument for some political belief they have long held and have taught to their children. It can appear that their cherished traditions must now undergo scrutiny from the point of view of an elite intellectual world that is strange to them. It is not surprising that the proliferation of "applied ethics" courses, and of philosophy generally, in our colleges and universities should alarm many parents.

Tradition is one foe of Socratic reason. But Socrates has other enemies as well. His values are assailed by the left as well as by the right. It is fashionable today in progressive intellectual circles to say that rational argument

is a male Western device, in its very nature subversive of the equality of women and minorities and non-Western people. Socratic argument is suspected, here again, of being arrogant and elitist—but in this case the elitism is seen as that of a dominant Western intellectual tradition that has persistently marginalized outsiders. The very pretense that one is engaged in the disinterested pursuit of truth can be a handy screen for prejudice. Such critics would look askance at the thesis projects of Liliana Garcés and Nicole Li: as powerless, marginalized people, they are allowing themselves to be coopted by the dominant liberal tradition when they devote their energies to rational argument in the Socratic tradition.

But Socrates' opponents on the left make the same error as do his conservative opponents, when they suppose that argument is subversive of democratic values. Socratic argument is not undemocratic. Nor is it subversive of the just claims of excluded people. In fact, as Socrates knew, it is essential to a strong democracy and to any lasting pursuit of justice. In order to foster a democracy that is reflective and deliberative, rather than simply a marketplace of competing interest groups, a democracy that genuinely takes thought for the common good, we must produce citizens who have the Socratic capacity to reason about their beliefs. It is not good for democracy when people vote on the basis of sentiments they have absorbed from talk-radio and have never questioned. This failure to think critically produces a democracy in which people talk at one another but never have a genuine dialogue. In such an atmosphere bad arguments pass for good arguments, and prejudice can all too easily masquerade as reason. To unmask prejudice and to secure justice, we need argument, an essential tool of civic freedom.

Liberal education in our colleges and universities is, and should be, Socratic, committed to the activation of each student's independent mind and to the production of a community that can genuinely reason together about a problem, not simply trade claims and counterclaims. Despite our allegiances to families and traditions, despite our diverse interests in correcting injustices to groups within our nation, we can and should reason together in a Socratic way, and our campuses should prepare us to do so. By looking at this goal of a community of reason as it emerges in the thought of Socrates and the Greek Stoics, we can show its dignity and its importance for democratic self-government. Connecting this idea to the teaching of philosophy in undergraduate courses of many sorts, we shall see that it is not Socratic education, but its absence, that would be fatal to the health of our society.

Socratic Inquiry

Greek philosophers before Socrates claimed to have authoritative knowledge of the topics on which they spoke. Parmenides' poem depicted the philosopher as an initiate who has received insight into the truth from a goddess who holds the keys of justice in her hands. From this vantage point he denounces the ordinary opinions of "mortals" as riddled through and through with error. Empedocles claimed special knowledge on the basis of his own long cycle of incarnations as "a boy, a girl, a bush, a bird, and a dumb sea fish." "Know well," he asserted, "that the truth is in what I say to you." Heraclitus compared his pithy aphorisms to the sayings of the Delphic oracle, implying that they contained a hidden wisdom that the listener must work to extract. Followers of Pythagoras thought of their teacher as a wonder-working sage, and formed communities bound by vows of silence to perpetuate his wisdom.

None of these teachers had a democratic idea of learning. For none was the truth something publicly available to all who can think;[3] for none was it the case that "everyone has something of his own to contribute to the truth."[4] Furthermore, the preferred subject matter of these thinkers was usually remote from the daily choices of a democratic citizenry—the creation of the cosmos, the number and nature of the elements, the relation between thought and being. For these reasons, such philosophical thinkers—who operated in Ionia and in southern Italy, not in Athens—did not have a close rapport with the developing Athenian democracy.

That democracy, however, had home-grown thinkers of other types, who supported better the emerging regime's desire for public evidence and public argument. Historians such as Herodotus gathered data about populations of many kinds in order to reflect about political values. Medical writers publicized facts about epidemics and about the structure of the body. Tragic poets depicted scenes of reasoning about central moral issues that imitated, and in turn shaped, the evolving culture of public debate in the democratic assembly. The distinctive contribution of Socrates was to bring sustained unrelenting philosophical argument to bear on these issues of communal concern—as Cicero later put it, bringing philosophy from the heavens down to earth.[5] His activity did not please everyone who encountered it.

Socrates walks up to a leading politician—a person who "seems knowing and clever to many people, and especially to himself."[6] He engages him in

questioning about his alleged expertise, asking him no doubt, as Socrates does so often, for a coherent, contradiction-free account of some central legal and political concepts, concepts such as equality, justice, and law. The expert proves unable to answer Socrates' questions in a satisfactory way. Socrates professes surprise. He goes away, concluding that he is after all a little more knowing than this expert, since he at least knows how difficult the concepts are, and how much his own understanding of them stands in need of further clarification, whereas the expert lacks not only an adequate understanding of the concepts but also knowledge of his own inadequacy. Socrates concludes that he is a very useful figure for democratic government to have around—like a stinging gadfly on the back of a noble but sluggish horse.[7]

When intellectuals behave this way, the people they intend to benefit are not always happy. Socrates proposed that he should be given a salaried position for life at the city's expense. The citizens of Athens had a different idea. To people who are deeply immersed in practical affairs, especially in a democracy, the questioning intellectual—especially, perhaps, the philosopher—is always a slightly suspect character. Why is this person so detached? What is his field of empirical expertise? What gives him the right to walk up to people and question them, as if he had the right to tell them what was wrong with them? Today too, when our campuses "sting" students into rethinking their values, there is likely to be anxiety and resentment. It is very natural to feel that the faculty who are causes of this rethinking must be a self-appointed radical elite, detached from and insensitive to popular values.

Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being.[8] In other words, this life of questioning is not just somewhat useful; it is an indispensable part of a worthwhile life for any person and any citizen. What did he mean by this?

Most of the people Socrates encountered were living passive lives, lives in which, in the most important things, their actions and choices were dictated by conventional beliefs. These beliefs inhabited and shaped them, but they had never made them truly their own, because they had never really looked into them, asking whether there were other ways of doing things, and which ways were truly worthy of guiding them in their personal and political lives.[9] To this extent, they had not made their own selves fully their own. Many of their beliefs were no doubt true, and possibly noble; this Socrates acknowledges, when he holds that education progresses not through

indoctrination from the teacher, but through a critical scrutiny of the pupil's own beliefs. When he compares democracy to a noble though sluggish horse, he implies that much of the material of conventional belief is on the right track. The real problem is the sluggishness of thought characteristic of these democratic citizens, their tendency to go through life without thinking about alternatives and reasons.

It is not surprising that they were this way, given the education they had had. Aristophanes' humorously nostalgic portrayal no doubt exaggerates: was there ever a time in any part of human history when young people asked no questions? But its very exaggeration shows the depth of a certain cultural ideal: that of the strong, manly young citizen who is quick to sing the old warlike songs and horrified by the thought of questioning or innovation. It is this sort of citizen whom Socrates intends to awaken.

We might wonder how such questioning can bring a practical benefit. When a skeptical culture looks at today's campuses from a distance, it is easy to judge that young people who question convention are rude and disrespectful, rootless and hedonistic. Their Socratic tendency to ask for reasons and arguments makes them insolent without making them wise. But if we look more closely at Plato's account of Socratic questioning, we will begin to understand how it could be beneficial to democracy; and we will begin to recognize some of those same benefits in our colleges and universities.

In the first book of Plato's *Republic,* Socrates and a group of his friends gather at the home of Cephalus, a wealthy elderly man. The dramatic setting chosen by Plato makes the reader vividly aware of problems of justice and right action. For the reader knows what the characters do not know—that some years after the peaceful scene of philosophical discussion depicted here, they will be embroiled on opposing sides in a violent political conflict that will result in death for three of them and risk of life for them all. A group of oligarchs known as the Thirty Tyrants will seize power in Athens, led by members of Plato's own family. Using slogans appealing to the notion of justice ("we must cleanse the city of the unjust"), they will set about enriching themselves in any way they can, arranging political charges against wealthy citizens in order to seize their property. Plato intends his reader to recall a famous speech by the orator Lysias—a silent character in the *Republic,* brother of the prominent character Polemarchus—in which he describes the brutal murder of his brother and his own narrow escape. So great

was the greed of the new antidemocratic rulers, he exclaims, that they dragged Polemarchus' wife out into the courtyard and ripped the gold earrings out of her ears. And all the while they said that their motive was justice.[10]

Here, then, we have a calm philosophical conversation about justice, set against a background of intense practical urgency. Glaucon and Adeimantus, Plato's own half-brothers, represent the future oligarchic side; Polemarchus, Lysias, and the silent character Niceratus (later murdered) represent the endangered democracy. When these people begin to talk about moral questions, the reader is likely to feel that much is at stake, and may, as well, be skeptical of the role of calm debate in settling what is all too obviously a question of power. When Plato's character Thrasymachus bursts out that justice is merely "the advantage of the stronger," his cynicism about morality would express a concern already alive in Plato's readers. Isn't justice, as Lysias suggests, simply a word that people throw around as a screen for their greedy appetites? Socrates' modern left-wing opponents resemble Lysias and Thrasymachus. They would urge us to see all this talk of argument and reason as a screen for the silent operations of power. Socrates' job is to illustrate the contribution of rational examination, justifying it both to the lover of tradition and to the power-conscious skeptic.

One moment in this exchange shows vividly the benefit that Socrates' "gadfly" technique can bring to democracy. Cephalus, a pious and virtuous man, has spoken of his satisfaction in a life well and justly lived, and the clear conscience with which he faces his impending death. He mentions that his own prosperity has contributed to his morality—for he felt no pressure to cheat or steal, but was able to go through life telling the truth and paying back what he owed. Socrates now asks him whether that is the way he would define justice—as telling the truth and paying back what you owe. Cephalus' son Polemarchus shows enthusiasm for this definition, which is based on conventional poetic authorities—the sort of texts the traditional education asked young people to memorize and not to question. Cephalus himself, gently laughing at the zeal of philosophers, hands over the discussion to his son and goes off to attend to the sacrifices.

What difference does it make that we define our concepts reflectively? Why shouldn't we, like Cephalus, follow traditional practices without philosophical examination? Or why shouldn't we, like Thrasymachus, wake up to the reality that it is all power and dismiss the interest in argument as a

way the powerful have of keeping the powerless in line? The dialogue that ensues gives us some answers to both questions. It turns out that the traditional conception of justice does not really prove adequate to guide Polemarchus in a variety of situations in which choice is called for. For example, it does not appear to give good guidance in a situation in which telling the truth and paying debts would result in a disaster. Socrates' example is that an insane person comes to you to ask for the return of a knife you have borrowed; you believe that he will use it to do harm, and you wonder what is the right and just thing to do. Such examples show that a morality that defines duties narrowly, without regard to their consequences, may be inadequate to guide us in a world in which the consequences of our acts matter, and matter greatly. It also indicates that our moral duties themselves are not always simple, and may, as in the case imagined, impose conflicting demands on the well-intentioned person who wishes both to behave honestly and to prevent harm to others. Morality, it seems, needs to recognize the existence of such conflicts and to learn to think well about them. We are, in addition, urged to think hard about the whole question of a morality based on rules and principles: can such a morality be adequate to the complex contingencies of life? Or must we cultivate, along with reverence for principle, moral faculties of discretion or discernment that can help us when we meet a difficult case that does not seem to be fully handled by the existing rule?

In this way, Socrates' inquiry opens up questions that are, and already were, of urgent importance for a culture committed to justice. These questions are still with us, when doctors try to decide how to balance patients' rights against patients' interests, asking what conduct justice requires; when judges try to decide when it is appropriate to use their own discretion in criminal sentencing or in constitutional or statutory interpretation, asking when the codified principle needs to be supplemented, extended, or even revised in the light of judgment about the complexities of a case. Should I, as a doctor, tell the truth to a terminally ill patient, even though such news, removing hope, will blight the remaining time this person has to live? Should I, as a judge, exercise discretion in the direction of leniency to do justice to the particular character of this criminal offender's history and conduct? A lawyer or doctor in the position of Cephalus—one who had never reflected about principles and their possible limits, one who had never attempted to systematize his or her intuitions about the just and the right—would be ill

equipped to reach an adequate decision in such circumstances. He or she would no doubt make some decision; but it is unlikely that such decisions would be consistent and evenhanded, reflecting a well-considered policy about the practice of his or her profession. That is why medical schools and law schools are increasingly supplementing their technical education with courses in ethics that pose just such questions and show students how difficult, and how urgent, they are. Such courses, like Socrates, do not impose anything from outside: in that sense they are highly respectful of the content of traditional ethical beliefs. But they do demand reflective sorting-out and consistency; and they claim that in so doing they are bringing a practical benefit.

Socrates' dialogue with Polemarchus and its modern counterparts show us something else as well: that progress can be made through a reflection that seeks the common good. Sorting these issues out does make it possible to give a more precise and adequate analysis of a medical or legal dilemma. Such an analysis, in turn, can help powerless people defend their claims against those in power. Progress needs clarity; it needs concepts and arguments. Distinguishing patients' rights from patients' interests, for example, as reflection about Socrates' example helps us to do, proves crucial in organizing people to oppose the excessive control of a professional medical elite and to vindicate their autonomy.

Socrates questions generals about courage, friends about friendship, politicians about self-restraint, religious people about piety.[11] In every case he demands to know whether they can give good and coherent reasons for what they do, and in every case they prove to have been insufficiently reflective. Socrates shows them that the demand for reasons has a bearing on what they will actually choose. This demand now begins to seem not an idle luxury in the midst of struggles for power, but an urgent practical necessity, if political deliberation is ever to have a dignity and consistency that make it more than a marketplace of competing interests, that make it a genuine search for the common good. Or, as Socrates himself says, "Remember that it is no chance matter we are discussing, but how one should live."[12]

Isn't all this undemocratic? Isn't Socrates really saying that an intellectual elite should rule and that the ordinary person has no right making his or her own decisions? This question raises two distinct problems, one historical and one philosophical. Historically, it is very important to distinguish Socrates' own practice of argument from the philosophical views of Plato, who

was certainly an elitist about reason, and openly hostile to democracy. It is not easy to draw this distinction, but it can be done: in some works, Plato represents Socrates as he was, and in others he advances his own ideas, using Socrates as a character. Other sources for the thought of the real-life Socrates help us make this distinction. The historical Socrates is committed to awakening each and every person to self-scrutiny. He relies on no sources of knowledge external to the beliefs of the citizens he encounters, and he regards democracy as the best of the available forms of government, though not above criticism.[13] Plato, by contrast, argues for the restriction of Socratic questioning to a small, elite group of citizens, who will eventually gain access to timeless metaphysical sources of knowledge; these few should rule over the many. It would be a bad thing to follow the example of Plato, concluding that most people cannot govern themselves. But to follow the example of the historical Socrates will help us fulfill our capacity for democratic self-government.

If, however, we follow the historical Socrates, can we really avoid becoming, in the end, philosophical followers of Plato? That is, if we make the demand that citizens scrutinize traditional authority through rational argument, does this inevitably lead to contempt for the people and the rule of an intellectual elite? The historical Socrates is plenty critical, sometimes downright contemptuous, of the citizens he meets. He doesn't think them competent to decide the big political questions that are before them, until they have satisfied his tough intellectual demands. What happens to those who flunk the test? Is he going to say that they should be ruled by people who have passed the test? The fear that antidemocratic political elitism will be the product of a Socratic college education underlies much of the unease about contemporary higher education. Both Socrates' conservative and his left-wing opponents have this fear—the former on behalf of traditions that may lose their authority, the latter on behalf of minority voices that may fail to be heard. It is important, then, to insist that Platonic elitism is not the necessary or even the likely result of allegiance to Socratic values.

Socrates—unlike Plato—holds that the capacities it takes to become a good reflective citizen are in all citizens, or at least all who are not in some unusual degree deprived of the ordinary ability to reason. Unlike Plato, who holds that a high level of mathematical and scientific expertise is required of the potential judge and legislator, Socrates, like the later Stoics, demands only the sort of moral capacity that ordinary people have and use in their

daily conduct. What he asks is that this capacity be trained and sharpened so as to realize itself more fully. Nor did Socrates propose that democracy should be replaced by aristocracy or tyranny if people proved resistant to his demands. In fact, in prison just before the end of his life—an end brought about, it would seem, by the irrational behavior of the democracy—he continued to hold that democracy was the best form of government. He believed, it seems, that his demands needed to be met if that noble but sluggish horse would ever be able to realize its potential fully. But even in its semisomnolent state it did better than the more repressive forms of government—perhaps because, more than other forms, it gave most respect to the powers of reasoning and moral judgment that reside in each and every citizen. It is perfectly obvious that the best educational system in the world will not make all our citizens rational in the Socratic way. The sources of irrationality in human life are many and profound. Thus, there is room in democracy for nonmajoritarian institutions, such as the judiciary. It also seems good that in our democracy, unlike many others, fundamental rights and liberties cannot be abridged by a majority vote. But rights belong to everyone, and this should mean that the development of reason belongs to everyone. The successful and stable self-realization of a democracy such as ours depends on our working as hard as possible to produce citizens who do examine tradition in the Socratic way. The successful integration of previously excluded groups as citizens with equal respect depends on realizing their capacities for rational autonomy and Socratic self-examination. Our institutions of higher education have a major role to play in this project.

The case for preferring democracy to other forms of government is weakened when one conceives of democratic choice as simply the clash of opposing interests. It is very much strengthened by conceiving of it in a more Socratic way, as the expression of a deliberative judgment about the overall good.[14] Socrates prefers democracy because democracy is noble, and he thinks it noble because it recognizes and respects powers of deliberation and choice that all citizens share. His case for democracy cannot easily be separated from his conception of what democratic choice is, and his respect for the moral faculties that are involved in these choices, if not for their current level of development. That is why education seems to him so urgently required in democracy. That is why it seems to him so irrational to turn the most important things over to people whom you then fail to educate. If your children were colts or calves, he says to a prominent citizen, you would

make sure that you found a really high-quality trainer for them. Why, then, do you neglect the education of your children, turning it over in a haphazard manner to any slick operator who happens along?[15] These questions would not matter so much in an aristocracy—except for the elite. And they would not matter in a democracy either, if we really thought that democratic choice was and should be simply the clash of uninformed interests. It is because we share with Socrates a richer conception of democratic deliberation—one that the Founders derived from their own reading of ancient Greek sources—that we need to take Socrates' demand to heart.

Socratism and Liberal Education: The Stoics

Socrates depicted "the examined life" as a central educational goal for democracy. But he gave few indications of how this abstract ideal might be realized in formal educational programs. It is from the writings of the Greek and especially the Roman Stoics that we begin to see the curricular implications of Socrates' example. Stoicism began in the third century B.C. at Athens; it continued to exercise enormous influence, in both Greece and Rome, at least through the second century A.D.[16] Its leading participants included figures of enormous political influence—including Seneca, who was regent and tutor to the young emperor Nero, and thus effectively ruler of the Roman Empire during that time; and, later, the emperor Marcus Aurelius, who poignantly reasoned that, since it was possible to philosophize anywhere, it must also be possible to philosophize in a palace. Since these thinkers left copious writings behind, as Socrates did not, and since they were actively engaged in the design of educational and other institutions, we can learn a good deal from them about the practical realization of Socratic goals. It is from their writings that we derive our modern conception of liberal education—or, rather, two distinct ideas of liberal education, which they carefully distinguished but we sometimes do not.

The central task of education, argue the Stoics following Socrates, is to confront the passivity of the pupil, challenging the mind to take charge of its own thought. All too often, people's choices and statements are not their own. Words come out of their mouths, and actions are performed by their bodies, but what those words and actions express may be the voice of tradition or convention, the voice of the parent, of friends, of fashion. This is so because these people have never stopped to ask themselves what they

really stand for, what they are willing to defend as themselves and their own. They are like instruments on which fashion and habit play their tunes, or like stage masks through which an actor's voice speaks. The Stoics hold, with Socrates, that this life is not worthy of the humanity in them, the capacities for thought and moral choice that they all possess.

According to the Stoics, critical argument leads to intellectual strength and freedom—by itself a remarkable transformation of the self, if the self has previously been lazy and sluggish—and also to a modification of the pupil's motives and desires. This initially surprising claim has cogency and political importance. Stoics observe that public life is frequently rendered irrational by the power of sentiments such as anger, fear, and envy. Such sentiments, however, are not simply biological urges: they have an intimate relation to thought. A person who gets angry at someone believes that the other person has willingly or culpably committed a serious offense. His anger depends on those beliefs. If he comes to believe that the alleged wrongdoer is really innocent, or that the so-called offense was really an accident, his angry emotion can be expected to be altered in consequence. Anger will also be transformed if the person changes his views about the importance of the wrong done, thinking it a trivial matter. Rational argument can't do anything about the things that other people do to us; Socratic inquiry cannot prevent me from being insulted or criticized. But it can make me think hard about the importance I assign to such slights, and the evidence on which I base my assignments of blame; and this itself affects the emotions.

Usually, the Stoics observe, the ideas involved in emotions such as fear and anger come from the habits and conventions of the surrounding society. Thus an average Roman male is likely to get very angry indeed if his host seats him in a low place at the dinner table.[17] Challenge the culture's obsession with these outward marks of status, and you have effectively challenged that person's basis for anger. If he really comes to believe that his place at table isn't worth worrying about, there will be a bit less anger around for society to channel. The Stoics claim that people who have conducted a critical examination of their beliefs about what matters will be better citizens—better in emotion as well as in thought.

Reason, in short, constructs the personality in a very deep way, shaping its motivations as well as its logic. Argument doesn't just provide students with reasons for doing thus and so; it also helps to make them more likely to act in certain ways, on the basis of certain motives. In this very deep way,

it produces people who are responsible for themselves, people whose reasoning and emotion are under their own control.

It is difficult, in a traditional culture, to devise an education that promotes rational freedom. Seneca addresses this problem in his famous letter on liberal education. The letter is addressed to Seneca's friend and constant correspondent Lucilius, a middle-aged political man whose questions about various aspects of philosophy, and of life, serve Seneca as occasions to develop his own views in an intimate and particularized way, while engaging in the give-and-take of argument. Lucilius has asked for Seneca's opinion on the traditional "liberal studies," or *studia liberalia.* This was an education by acculturation to the time-honored values and practices of the Roman upper classes; it included grammar, music and poetry, some math and science, and the use of rhetoric in public life—all taught in a way that emphasized uncritical assimilation of tradition. The word *liberalis* in the traditional phrase meant "suited for the freeborn gentleman." Seneca begins his letter by announcing that he will call that understanding of the term into question. For the only kind of education that really deserves the name *liberalis,* or, as we might literally render it, "freelike," is one that makes its pupils free, able to take charge of their own thought and to conduct a critical examination of their society's norms and traditions. He then proceeds to examine this notion. Combining his discussion here with material taken from elsewhere in Stoic writings, we may extract five claims about Socratic education.

1. *Socratic education is for every human being.* From the Socratic idea that the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being, together with their belief that a certain sort of critical and philosophy-infused education is both necessary and (if well done) sufficient for a Socratic examined life, the Stoics derive the conclusion that this sort of education is of essential importance for every human being. Since they also hold that it has prerequisites, such as literacy, basic logical and mathematical capability, and a good deal of knowledge about the world, they tend to think of this as a kind of higher education and to defend the view that higher education is an essential part of every human being's self-realization. Because of this focus on advanced or "higher" studies, we may draw on their insights to flesh out a picture of higher education in our own society, though we should not neglect the considerable differences between their era and our own.

Indeed, our own society has followed this Socratic/Stoic line more thoroughly than any other nation, attempting to construct a higher education that combines specialized preprofessional education with a liberal education shared by all students. The nations of Europe do not do this. Students in Europe enter university to study one subject, be it law or medicine or philosophy or history or chemistry or classics. There is no idea, in these curricula, of a core of common studies that is essential to the good life for each and every person.

The Greeks and Romans had a noble ideal, which they did not always fully realize in practice. Socrates announces that he questions everyone he meets—but it is only in his imagined picture of life in the underworld that he can question women. Later philosophers broadened the scope of "everyone," instructing women and even, in the case of the Roman Stoics, arguing for their equal education. The extension of education to women, and also to slaves and poor people, followed directly from the Socratic sense of education's importance for every human being—combined with the recognition of a simple fact, that these people are also human, worthy of respect and concern.[18]

Similarly in our own society, the noble ideal that Socratic education is for all has not been fully realized in practice. We must remember how many people were excluded from the benefits of higher education until very recently. Today our campuses are attempting to fulfill the original Socratic mission, really questioning *everyone,* recognizing *everyone's* humanity. The United States has a larger proportion of college-enrolled citizens than any other nation (although many other nations do more to subsidize higher education for qualified students). It is not surprising that this simple idea has generated many changes, and many demands for further change.

There is an intimate connection between the conception of what liberal education involves and the conclusion that it must be extended to all citizens alike. For if higher education were conceived of as the calling of a select few to a life of theoretical contemplation—as it is sometimes conceived, for example, in Plato—it would be impossible, as Plato in fact argues, to extend it broadly. We would have to search for an elite with special powers of mind, and only these should be admitted to the higher curriculum. Indeed, trying to admit all to this form of study would lead to large-scale social problems. For this contemplative life, as Plato imagines it, is not compatible with a daily active pursuit of political and familial duties. But then, who will there

be left to attend to the practical functions of life? Thus Plato's conception of contemplation entails political elitism in more than one way. The Socratic/Stoic conception, by contrast, supports and is supported by democracy. It is because higher education is the development of powers of practical reasoning that every citizen is believed to have that it can be universalized; and it is because it is intimately connected with citizenship and the family that its universalization does not threaten, but promises to strengthen, the democratic political community.[19]

2. *Socratic education should be suited to the pupil's circumstances and context.* If education is understood in the Socratic way, as an eliciting of the soul's own activity, it is natural to conclude, as Socrates concludes, that education must be very personal. It must be concerned with the actual situation of the pupil, with the current state of the pupil's knowledge and beliefs, with the obstacles between that pupil and the attainment of self-scrutiny and intellectual freedom. Socrates therefore questions people one by one. The Stoics, concerned with the broad extension of education to all, are not always able to do this. But they insist that individualized instruction is always, in principle, the goal. Education, they say, is to the soul what the medical art is to the body. As doctors do well only if they are sufficiently sensitive to their patients' actual conditions and symptoms, so too with the teacher. This they show in practice in many ways; these include refusing to recommend a universal curriculum, and writing philosophical works exemplifying Socratic attentiveness to the particular situation of the student.

In recent debates on higher education, the tendency has been to ask whether a "great books" curriculum or certain types of core or distribution requirements are good things in general. All too rarely does anyone ask about the circumstances and background of the students for whom requirements are being designed. If we have in mind a general shared goal but, like the Stoics, acknowledge that our students approach the goal from many different starting points, we will naturally conclude that many different curricular approaches are required.

3. *Socratic education should be pluralistic, that is, concerned with a variety of different norms and traditions.* There is no more effective way to wake pupils up than to confront them with difference in an area where they had previously thought their own ways neutral, necessary, and natural. Exploring

the way in which another society has organized matters of human well-being, or gender, or sexuality, or ethnicity and religion will make the pupil see that other people in viable societies have done things very differently. In our complex world, Socratic inquiry mandates pluralism.

There is a widespread fear—reflected, for example, in the argument of Allan Bloom's book *The Closing of the American Mind*—that critical scrutiny of one's own traditions will automatically entail a form of cultural relativism that holds all ways of life to be equally good for human beings and thereby weakens allegiance to one's own. This was the deep fear, too, that led Athenians to charge Socrates with corruption of the young, and led Aristophanes to associate him with father-beating. But of course this is not what Socratic scrutiny implies. Rather, it implies that we should cling to that which we can rationally defend, and be willing to discover that this may or may not be identical with the view we held when we began the inquiry. The Stoics held that a single picture of the flourishing human life could be defended by reason for all human beings in all times and places. Many people today who think about international justice believe, similarly, that certain norms of human well-being and respect for rights will survive critical scrutiny in all places. Confrontation with the different in no way entails that there are no cross-cultural moral standards and that the only norms are those set by each local tradition. If Bloom and others do think that American traditions are so fragile that mere knowledge of other ways will cause young people to depart from them, why are they so keen on endorsing and shoring up these fragile traditions? What is excellent in our own traditions will survive the scrutiny of Socratic argument.

4. *Socratic education requires ensuring that books do not become authorities.* It is an irony of the contemporary "culture wars" that the Greeks are frequently brought onstage as heroes in the "great books" curricula proposed by many conservatives. For there is nothing on which the Greek philosophers were more eloquent, and more unanimous, than the limitations of such curricula. The old Athenian culture described by Aristophanes did favor an idea of education as acculturation to traditional values. This education relied on canonical texts that had moral authority. The young men who marched to school in rows to sing "Athena, dread sacker of cities" learned quickly enough that internalizing these time-honored words and ideas was the goal of their schooling, and that critical questioning brought

swift disapproval. But it was just this conception of uncritical internalization against which the philosophical tradition rebelled, setting its banner in the camp of active reasoning.

Socrates himself wrote nothing at all. If we are to believe the account of his reasons given in Plato's *Phaedrus,* it was because he believed that books could short-circuit the work of active critical understanding, producing a pupil who has a "false conceit of wisdom." Books are not "alive." At best, they are reminders of what excellent thinking is like, but they certainly cannot think. Often, however, so great is their prestige that they actually lull pupils into forgetfulness of the activity of mind that is education's real goal, teaching them to be passively reliant on the written word. Such pupils, having internalized a lot of culturally authoritative material, may come to believe that they are very wise. And this arrogance undercuts still further the motivations for real searching. Such people are even less likely than ignorant people to search themselves, looking for arguments for and against their culture's ways of doing things. So books, when used in education, must be used in such a way as to discourage this sort of reverence and passivity.

Books, furthermore, lack the attentiveness and responsiveness of real philosophical activity (which, as we recall, respects the pupil's particular circumstances and context). They "roll around" all over the place with a kind of inflexible sameness, addressing very different people, always in the same way.[20] The conclusion, once again, is that books, though valuable as reminders of arguing, can be harmful if used as authorities.

The Stoics have some vivid images to make this same point. Epictetus tells the story of a young person who comes to him boasting that he had finally "got" down pat the contents of Chrysippus' treatise on logical problems. Epictetus says to him that he is like an athlete who comes in saying gleefully: "Look, I've got a new set of training weights in my room." This person, he continues, will not get the response, "Great, now you've done it." The response he will get is, "Very well, show me what you can *do* with your weights." So too with the pupil: show that you can use what you read to think well and to take charge of your own reasoning.[21]

Seneca develops the idea further in a letter, warning the pupil against relying on the wisdom contained in "great books" as authoritative:

> "This is what Zeno said." But what do you say? "This is Cleanthes' view." What is yours? How long will you march under another person's orders? Take command, and say something memorable of your own

> . . . It is one thing to remember, another to know. To remember is to safeguard something entrusted to the memory. But to know is to make each thing one's own, not to depend on the text and always to look back to the teacher. "Zeno said this, Cleanthes said this." Let there be a space between you and the book.[22]

Neither Seneca nor Epictetus repudiates the written text. The analogy of books to weights has a positive side. Books, including some of the great texts from the past of one's own culture, can indeed tone up the slack mind, giving it both the information it needs to think well and examples of excellent argument. Literacy, including cultural literacy, confers both strength and independence,[23] if viewed as a kind of essential training and nourishment, not as itself the goal. Working through the arguments contained in great books can make the mind more subtle, more rigorous, more active. It guarantees that the mind will confront a wide range of options on important questions, and confront them in a challenging presentation, even where popular culture is diffuse and superficial. All this the Stoics knew already; it is even more important for our time.

But the negative side of Epictetus' image is also plain: books are all too likely to become objects of veneration and deference, sitting in the mind without producing strength in the mind itself. This is, of course, especially likely to happen if they are introduced as cultural authorities, as in curricula titled "Western civilization" or "The Great Books." If we were to use a more Senecan title, such as "Some useful and nourishing books that are likely to help you think for yourself," or, following Epictetus' idea, "Some training weights for the mind," then we would be on the right track. Everyone involved would be on notice that there is no substitute for thinking things through, and the hope for a quick fix for complicated problems would no longer be held out. We would see the truth on which Seneca's letter on liberal education ends: that we live in a messy, puzzling, and complicated world, in which there is absolutely no substitute for one's own active searching.

Socratic Reason and Its Enemies

We have not produced truly free citizens in the Socratic sense unless we have produced people who can reason for themselves and argue well, who understand the difference between a logically valid and a logically invalid ar-

gument, who can distinguish between the logical form of an argument and the truth of its premises. Logical reasoning, like speaking one's native language, comes naturally to human beings; no doubt it is part of the equipment we evolved in order to survive. Work with young children has shown repeatedly that they can master all the basics of logic readily, through the use of simple examples. But, like mastery of one's native language, it needs help from teachers, at many different levels of education. Most students don't immediately spot fallacious forms of reasoning in a complicated text—or in a political argument they hear on television. Most people carry around inside themselves lots of ill-sorted material, beliefs they have never examined for logical consistency, inferences they have never examined for validity.

This, indeed, was the central way in which Socrates saw himself as making a contribution to democracy. If all we have to work with is what people believe, how will we make progress? By getting people to sort out what they think they know, to test beliefs for consistency, inferences for validity, the way Polemarchus progressed by noticing that the beliefs he shared with his father were not consistent. Students who read the *Republic* should see how Socrates convicts Polemarchus of inconsistency, but at the same time they should ask themselves how well Socrates is arguing, and whether his conclusions really do follow from his premises. This is the primary way in which Plato as a writer overcomes the danger of passivity inherent in the written word: by provoking the reader to logical analysis and criticism.

Logical analysis is at the heart of democratic political culture. When we do wrong to one another politically, bad argument is often one cause. We reason in ways such as the following: "A high proportion of crimes in my community are committed by black people; here is a black person; so he's likely to be a criminal." "All mothers are women. This person here is a woman. So she's going to get pregnant and quit the job, so I'd be better off hiring a man." Of course these are invalid inferences; but we "think" this way all the time. Logical analysis dissipates these confusions. It unmasks prejudice that masquerades as reason. Doing without it would mean forfeiting one of the most powerful tools we have to attack abuses of political power. Although logic will not get us to love one another, it may get us to stop pretending that we have rational arguments for our refusals of sympathy.

Logical analysis, furthermore, shows us healthy ways of interacting as citizens. Instead of claim and counterclaim, we can exchange views critically,

examining one another's reasoning. Billy Tucker found it illuminating to learn that one could spend a week thinking about arguments against the death penalty, of which he approved. It showed him a new way of thinking about people on the other side of the issue: they were not just adversaries, they were people thinking as he was thinking, and he came to understand their point of view. At the same time, he came to see how bad the reasoning is in many news accounts. This insight gave him a new wariness, and this wariness again promoted a more fruitful dialogue with people on the other side of the issue.

Socratic reason is not unopposed on today's campuses. It faces two different types of opponents. The first is a conservative opposition, who suspect that Socrates' dedication to argument will subvert traditional values. This opposition is stronger outside the academy than within it, but we can also find it at some institutions. At Belmont, for example, even the separate existence of the Philosophy Department was at one time a matter of controversy. Philosophy majors at Belmont face opposition for their choice. "Secular humanism" was the term chosen by their fellow students to express a basic mistrust of philosophical reason, suggesting that any philosophy major must already have left the Baptist faith behind.

As the students themselves felt, this was a mistaken conclusion. Whatever our personal religious commitments, we are all citizens of a democracy, and we have to deliberate together. Philosophical education plays a valuable role in this sort of deliberation. There is no contradiction between governing one's most personal choices by the faith to which one adheres and learning to argue in a Socratic manner with one's fellow citizens. Indeed, our democracy is unlike many others in the careful protections it accords to private religious choices and to the separation of those choices from the contentious debates of the public realm. It is no sign of disrespect to any religious tradition to ask that its members use in the public realm arguments that can be understood by people from other traditions, or to encourage that sort of argument in class.

More often, however, Socratic goals encounter a different type of resistance, from challenges to truth and reason associated with postmodernist literary theory. Even logic itself is not immune from attack. It is often alleged—not only by bigoted or unsympathetic people but often also by champions of race and sex equality—that logical argument is not for women or not for African-Americans. Some left-wing opponents of Socrates think that

logic is all right in its place but impotent as a critical tool, next to the entrenched realities of power. In that sense it is not worth spending one's time on it or investing hope in it. This cynical position, like that of Thrasymachus, can best be refuted by showing what reason can do and has done in the struggle for justice, and by pointing out that if the game is merely power, the powerless will always lose out. Reason has a special dignity that lifts it above the play of forces, and it is only to the extent that reason is respected in a society that minorities will be able to make their just but unpopular claims heard. In Plato's vivid image, reason is a soft golden cord, sometimes pushed around by the iron cord of greed and envy and fear (in operating the imaginary marionette that is the human being), but sometimes prevailing, and always shining with a dignity of its own. It is difficult to imagine how bogus arguments against the equality of women, or of ethnic or religious or racial minorities, could be unmasked without a reliance on the distinction between prejudice and reason; such unmasking will prove futile unless the democratic community as a whole shares that distinction. Cynicism of the Thrasymachean sort is the best recipe for continued oppression of the powerless.

Some left-wing opponents of Socrates, however, make a still stronger attack on logic: they charge that the central forms of logical argumentation don't suit the minds of women, or minorities, or non-Western people. Although these views are sometimes put forward by people who wish to deny full political equality to minorities or to women, their influence in the academy derives from the fact that they are also put forward in a progressive spirit, as if we cannot help disadvantaged groups to make progress unless we recognize the "fact" that logic itself is patriarchal or a tool of colonial oppression. But we do not respect the humanity of any human being unless we assume that person to be capable of understanding the basic issues of consistency and validity and the basic forms of inference. We sell that person short as a human being unless we work to make that person's potentiality for logical thought into an active reality. Such criticisms typically show ignorance of the logical traditions of non-Western peoples and a condescending attitude to the logical abilities of women and racial minorities.[24] There is no sound evidence for such claims, and it is counterproductive for allegedly progressive thinkers to speak as if there were.

But what about the goals of logical argument? Socrates didn't just argue for fun; he had a project: to find an account that was objective in the sense

that it was free from bias and prejudice and could withstand critical scrutiny. A further pernicious claim made by postmodernist opponents of Socrates is that the usual goals of Socratic argument, truth and objectivity, are unavailable. A pursuit of these goals, it is alleged, can be nothing other than a mask for the assertion of power or self-interest.

It is important to separate what is plausible in these ideas from what is both naive and dangerous. We should all agree that people who claim to be pursuing truth or to be reasoning objectively (by which we usually mean in a manner free from illegitimate bias) do not always do so. Often, whether consciously or unconsciously, they are using the mantle of truth-seeking to pursue their own interests or to assert the received wisdom of habit—as Socrates so often showed by unmasking pseudoarguments. This defective way of inquiring, however, says very little about the search for truth itself.

We should also agree that modern analyses of truth and knowledge cast grave doubt on one traditional notion: namely, the idea that we can have access to the way things are in the universe entirely independently of the workings of our minds. Technical work in the philosophy of quantum mechanics and the philosophy of language has caused many philosophers to agree with Kant in thinking the world knowable to and truly describable by human beings only as shaped by our concepts and our mental faculties. Even observation would seem to be theory-laden, using salient categories that derive from our own conceptual scheme. (Not all philosophers agree that these points have been established; some would still defend the beleaguered "realist" picture.) At this point, we find intense disagreement: some philosophers hold, with Kant, that we can still defend a single conceptual scheme as the most adequate to reality; some hold that there is a small plurality of adequate schemes governed by stringent criteria of rightness; some adopt a still more elastic pluralism. Philosophers such as Hilary Putnam, Nelson Goodman, Donald Davidson, W. V. O. Quine, and Richard Rorty take up various positions on this spectrum.[25] All, with the possible exception of Rorty, still think we can establish claims as true by arguments that rightly claim objectivity and freedom from bias.

We should agree, further, that one of the factors to be considered in evaluating a claim is the role of social and political power in shaping the concepts it contains. The philosophers named above, focusing on the analysis of scientific knowledge and linguistic reference, have not always thought much about political influences on knowledge-seeking. Consequently, they

have not always devoted enough attention to the way in which the desire of a dominant group to retain power can enter into the very articulation of basic ethical and social categories. This insight was grasped already by Plato's characters Thrasymachus and Callicles, when they showed how powerful groups can frequently define moral norms in ways that perpetuate their own superiority—defining "justice," for example, to include obedience to the ruler, so that the ruled would be kept in their place. Michel Foucault developed these ideas further. Although one might take issue with many aspects of Foucault's work, from its historical incompleteness to its lack of conceptual clarity, it contains important insights and remains the only truly important work to have entered philosophy under the banner of "postmodernism."

We should, then, agree with several important claims that postmodernist thinkers have recently stressed. The search for truth is a human activity, carried on with human faculties in a world in which human beings struggle, often greedily, for power. But we should not agree that these facts undermine the very project of pursuing truth and objectivity. The insights of the Kantian tradition—and of its modern heirs such as Putnam, Quine, and Davidson—yield not a radical assault on truth and reason, but a new articulation of those goals. Acknowledging the contributions of language and the human mind invalidates a simpleminded type of empiricism but leaves Socrates on his feet. We need not forgo the aspiration to truth and objectivity; we need only conceive of these goals in a nuanced way, taking account of the shaping role of our categories. Socrates himself made no appeal to truths that transcend human experience, and yet he held that the pursuit of ethical truth is essential to full humanity. Many other pictures of a nontranscendent search for truth have been advanced in ethical philosophy, by figures including Kant and the American pragmatists.

Nor does the recognition of the role of power and interest in shaping concepts give us reason to despair of achieving freedom from bias: it just puts us on notice that we will need to sort out legitimate from illegitimate interests, even as we pursue the other aspects of a conceptual inquiry. This sorting makes Socratic life more complicated, but it doesn't make it in any sense impossible.[26]

What is deeply pernicious in today's academy, then, is the tendency to dismiss the whole idea of pursuing truth and objectivity as if those aims could no longer guide us. Such attacks on truth are not new: we find them,

for example, in Thrasymachus and in the ancient Greek skeptics.[27] But they are forms of sophistry whose influence mars the otherwise promising pursuit of Socratic goals on our campuses. Postmodernists do not justify their more extreme conclusions with compelling arguments. Nor do they even grapple with the technical issues about physics and language that any modern account of these matters needs to confront. For this reason, their influence has been relatively slight in philosophy, where far more nuanced accounts of these matters abound. Derrida on truth is simply not worth studying for someone who has been studying Quine and Putnam and Davidson. In other parts of the humanities, however, they exercise a large influence (in part because their work is approachable as the technical work of philosophers frequently is not), causing students to think that those in the know have disdain for Socrates and his goals. This is one further reason why we should insist that philosophy be a large part of the undergraduate curriculum: because this field gives real insight into debates that go on elsewhere, and unmasks in truly Socratic fashion the pretenses of fashionable authorities. It is Socratic to ask critical questions about Socrates' methods and goals; we must continue to do so. But as we do so we should continue to be devoted to the Socratic ideal of sorting things out and finding an account that can endure critical scrutiny.

Socrates in the Modern Curriculum

How can an undergraduate liberal arts education follow Socrates' example? The most important ingredient of a Socratic classroom is obviously the instructor. No curricular formula will take the place of provocative and perceptive teaching that arouses the mind. And a dedicated instructor can enliven the thinking of students in almost any curricular setting. Socratic activity can take place in virtually any humanities or social science course, in connection with readings of many different kinds, as long as the instructor knows a good deal about the particular nature of the student body and strives to develop each individual's capacity to reason.

Although in principle any humanities course might teach Socratic reasoning, many such courses do not focus intensively on critical argument. But such a focus, characteristic of the professional philosopher, is necessary to teach students how to analyze the arguments that they and others make. Given the tremendous importance, for citizenship and for life, of producing

students who can think clearly and justify their views, a course or courses in philosophy play a vital role in the undergraduate liberal arts curriculum. If philosophy presents itself as an elite, esoteric discipline preoccupied with formal notation and with questions of little evident human interest, it will not be able to play this role. But professional philosophy has increasingly, over the past twenty years, returned to the focus on basic human interests that it had in the time of John Dewey and William James. Questions about justice and rights, questions about love, fear, and grief, questions of medical and legal and business ethics—all these are now not at the margins of the profession but at its heart. The profession is once again, like Socrates, bringing philosophy from the heavens down to the earth.

Since philosophy is frequently intimidating to students, who (like Billy Tucker) think it is for an elite, students cannot be expected to seek out these courses on their own. In most cases, then—wherever an institution is not confident that students will generally elect such courses on their own with faculty advice—a course or courses in philosophy should be required of all students. This may be done in a variety of ways. One may straightforwardly require a philosophy course, whether one chosen from the established departmental curriculum or from a separate group of introductory courses. One may, as Harvard does, require a course in "moral reasoning" that draws on faculty from several disciplines, with a common mission. One may also aim to infuse philosophical reasoning and analysis into a basic humanities course, for example a course that reads a range of major philosophical texts. The disciplinary base of such courses should not stray too far from philosophy, or the rigor of analysis so important for the Socratic virtues of mind will be diluted.

Institutions that have successful philosophy requirements are those that have studied closely the character of their student body. At Notre Dame the student body is overwhelmingly Catholic and fairly well prepared academically. Like many other Catholic institutions, the university requires two semesters of philosophy in addition to two of theology. This requirement derives from the Catholic tradition's strong emphasis on being able to give reasons for one's religious and moral beliefs. The announced purpose of such courses, for example the course "Science and Human Values" taught by Philip Quinn, is to produce Catholics who don't believe blindly, but can think through their beliefs and reason about them with others, including others who differ in religion. The courses are diverse, but all assign de-

manding readings and focus a good deal of attention on class discussion and the writing of analytical papers. Class size is rarely more than twenty students. Students express satisfaction with the way in which philosophy classes promote more general goals.

Another very different institution that has profited from a two-semester philosophy requirement is Randolph-Macon College, in Ashland, Virginia. The student body of Randolph-Macon, a midsize liberal arts college, differs from that of Notre Dame in several ways: greater religious diversity, a somewhat lower average of prior academic achievement, a greater tendency to focus on narrow preprofessional semivocational studies. These students would very likely take few demanding courses in traditional humanities and social science subjects without requirements; subjects such as business and computer science would occupy most of their attention. The institution is committed to giving these students an education that does not focus on these narrow instrumental goals, but that gives them something that can impart meaning and discipline to their intellectual lives in a general way, making them both richer as individuals and better informed as citizens. Their experience has been that philosophy, taught in small sections in a highly Socratic manner, plays a crucial role in waking these students up and getting them to take responsibility for their own thinking and choices. In these classes, students participate eagerly. They debate with excitement, for example, about Plato's attack on the poets in the *Republic,* relating Plato's arguments to issues such as violence and sex on television and in the movies. Later a larger group joined in a public discussion of the role of love in the good life, talking about literary examples and relating them to their lives. The greatest enemies of Socratism at Randolph-Macon are vocationalism and indifference. The two-semester philosophy requirement and the dedicated teaching that supports it make at least some headway against these problems.

The University of Pittsburgh is a four-year campus of the state university system, frequently chosen by urban commuting students. Student preparation and skills vary widely. The institution also houses one of the nation's most outstanding philosophy departments, plus an equally outstanding program in the history and philosophy of science. A two-semester philosophy requirement, maintained by a long list of small courses focused on ethics and value, creates a common learning experience for the students and puts them in contact with some of the best young instructors in the nation (since

many of the courses are taught by advanced graduate students, who at Pitt are often the stars of the profession's next generation). All involved seem happy with the way this requirement has evolved. Although instructors express some frustration with the amount of remedial work they need to do on writing skills, they feel satisfied that they are getting through to the students well enough to realize their Socratic purpose.

Bentley College, in Waltham, Massachusetts, is a business college that does not claim to give a general liberal arts education. Nonetheless, the administration has decided to require philosophy of all students, for reasons of citizenship and general mental development. Bentley students have little initial motivation to pursue liberal education in the humanities. But they are going to be citizens and voters; therefore the institution judges that they need to develop the ability to reason for themselves about important issues concerning morality, justice, and law. The philosophy requirement is designed to elicit good reasoning on these issues.

Billy Tucker is the sort of student for whom the Bentley requirement is designed. He is highly intelligent but not very confident about his intellectual ability. He still lives with his parents, and his political views are largely derived from his parents, his community, and the popular media. Without such a requirement he would have focused on business courses and left "culture" for others. In Krishna Mallick's course, typical of the courses satisfying the requirement, students begin with several dialogues of Plato, learning to think about arguments by analyzing the examples there. Tucker was drawn into the course by his excitement about these questions, made more vivid for him by seeing a film in class about Socrates' life and death. Why did Socrates refuse to escape from prison, when by doing so he could have saved his life? How does Socrates argue about our obligation to obey the law? Would Socrates have been a draft resister? These things grabbed him—partly on account of the active style of Krishna Mallick's teaching, partly because of the way she had used the film to bring the issues to life. Tucker came to see these questions as about himself and his life, in a way that questions in other required courses were not.

Harvard's Core Curriculum contains a modified philosophy requirement, in the form of a one-semester "moral reasoning" requirement and a one-semester "social analysis" requirement. The moral reasoning courses were designed to get students to think Socratically about central ethical and political issues. Their purpose is very similar to Notre Dame's, though in a

secular form: to produce citizens who can give reasons for what they choose, and think reflectively about difficult moral controversies. Harvard students are extremely well prepared and inclined to overconfidence. A strange combination of arrogance that they are at Harvard and fear that they don't really belong there makes them reluctant to expose their real thinking in class. Frequently they cope with fear by adopting a brittle sophistication, which makes it difficult to find out what they really believe. Part of this sophistication may well be a pose of cultural relativism or postmodernism, which the instructor in a moral reasoning course will need to subject to Socratic scrutiny.

Many courses in the area focus on the arguments of historical texts, although to satisfy the requirement historical study must be pursued with a view to developing Socratic reasoning abilities. Others investigate fundamental issues of ethical theory, such as the nature of justice, using both historical and modern readings. A few, finally, focus on contemporary controversies, for example in medical ethics. All are designed to involve the student actively in constructing and analyzing arguments and in criticizing the arguments of others. These courses are taught by a very distinguished group of faculty, including philosopher Thomas Scanlon, political theorist Michael Sandel, aesthetician and political thinker Stanley Cavell, and philosopher/economist Amartya Sen. The drawback of the Harvard system is that the courses are very large: some have close to a thousand students. On the other hand, the instructors usually care a lot about communicating with students, and the program is very well funded, so that discussion sections led by graduate teaching assistants have no more than fifteen to twenty students. As at Pittsburgh, the graduate assistants are themselves a very dedicated group, the leaders of the field in the next generation.

All these courses in diverse institutions combine instruction in Socratic argument with topics of moral urgency, showing students that argument is not just a sterile tool, but makes a difference to their lives. As Amartya Sen describes his goal,

> The Sanskrit word for philosophy—*dársana*—also means seeing clearly. Philosophy does have much to do with clarifying matters—not through specialized knowledge but through reasoning. It is possible, of course, to be wonderfully clear and dead wrong. But lucidity does not help the survival of baseless beliefs, silly deductions, groundless

> prejudice, or the justification of needless misery. Well, that's something for clear reasoning, even though it won't solve all our problems.[28]

His moral reasoning course, which connects the study of different accounts of ethical rationality (in Aristotle, Kant, and the Utilitarians, among others) to pressing issues of social justice, exemplifies these ideas about the practical value of clarity.

Students who take philosophy courses will very likely be exposed elsewhere to postmodernist attacks on truth and argument. One further benefit of requiring a course or courses in philosophy, indeed, is that such courses give students materials they can use to question the attacks on argument they may encounter elsewhere in the humanities curriculum. By getting involved in a philosophy course, students will learn how to think about what they are being asked to do, with a sophistication that is not always present in courses offered in other departments.

Philosophical reflection may also be infused into a broader humanities course or set of courses, but in that case it is very important that philosophers participate in the design and teaching of these courses. Two promising examples of this sort are the revised Western traditions course at the University of Nevada at Reno, where philosopher Deborah Achtenberg has coordinated philosophical discussion (based on Plato and other ancient authors) with literary and historical readings, and the University of New Hampshire's relatively new humanities course, where philosopher Charlotte Witt has worked alongside instructors from literature and the history of science to develop an account of the ancient world that infuses philosophical reflection into the study of history and literature as well as of specifically philosophical works. Both of these courses are well designed for a large group of students with little antecedent preparation in the humanities. Both are well designed and taught but are handicapped to some extent by large size, which inhibits discussion and makes it difficult to assign enough student writing.

At St. Lawrence, a well-funded liberal arts school that attracts an increasingly well-motivated group of students (70 percent receive financial aid), the Cultural Encounters program has managed to infuse philosophy with great success into a variety of undergraduate courses in humanities, social

science, and natural science. Indeed, the program was introduced in addition to a non-Western studies requirement for precisely this reason. Because the faculty group running the program received a grant that supported extensive study and group discussion, all have been able to work out a coordinated approach to the teaching of cultural relativism—that is, the view that each local group should be the court of last resort for its own moral practices, and that there are no universal moral standards. All courses dealing with cross-cultural issues are enriched by Socratic examination of the relativist values that students frequently bring to the course. Students confront hard questions about tolerance by thinking about how we should react to others who are themselves intolerant; and they think about differences between tolerance and relativism, between the acceptance of a practice with which one disagrees and the view that there are no criteria of moral evaluation that transcend a local group. Students at St. Lawrence are bright but relatively unmotivated. Socratic inquiry needs to work to overcome student inertia, and this has been done by arousing student interest in cross-cultural comparison and evaluation. Here is a case in which, without a philosophy requirement, Socratic inquiry has been widely and rigorously promoted in many courses. The reasons for this success are the amount of common effort by the faculty group and the dedicated leadership of its two coordinators, Grant Cornwell from Philosophy and Eve Stoddard from English. Not all students, however, get the benefit of this approach.

Some campuses feel that they can infuse Socratic values throughout the curriculum without required courses of any sort. In some cases they recommend the activity of choosing one's own curriculum as itself a setting for Socratic activity as, in dialogue with a faculty adviser, students reflect about their own goals and the courses that might promote them. Three institutions that have successfully practiced this approach to various extents are Grinnell College, in Iowa; Amherst College, in Massachusetts; and Brown University, in Providence, Rhode Island. All are influenced by the Stoic goals of self-command, or taking charge of one's own life through reasoning. (Ralph Waldo Emerson developed his own ideas on "self-reliance" by reflecting on Stoic ideals, and Emerson is a central source for Brown's curriculum.) This approach works best with very well-prepared students and a faculty devoted to teaching. All three are lucky to have that combination. It requires, in addition, an extremely well-supported and well-organized system of advis-

ing. Each Brown student is assigned to a faculty adviser who works in partnership with a senior undergraduate; together the team advises about ten entering freshmen, meeting with them regularly throughout the year. Much depends on the faculty member's dedication and knowledge and on the student's willingness to take advice. Furthermore, the procedures, at one level Socratic, don't by any means guarantee a thorough, rigorous exposure to Socratic philosophizing. By giving students so much independence to question and inquire so early, the system sometimes eventually produces upperclassmen who, as a result of naiveté and peer pressure, have fallen prey to intellectual fads and have never really learned habits of rigorous inquiry. It is much harder to get these students to work through the ideas in a Socratic manner than it would be with freshmen. When their arguments are criticized, they tend to react with resentment, as if the activity of criticizing an argument were an illicit and somewhat old-fashioned exercise. One sometimes sees such students in philosophy courses, such as "Feminist Philosophy," that attract students already heavily influenced by attacks on argument. These students are a minority. Most students at Brown take a wide range of courses in humanities and social science, and a large proportion have at least some exposure to philosophy. Most students who do not take philosophy take courses in other areas in which rigorous argument is taught and respected (such as political theory, religious studies, economics, history, and other parts of the humanities). But there is at least some reason for concern that Brown's preference for rational self-government in the choice of curriculum may conduce to an absence of rational self-government at the end of some students' education.

We cannot and should not hope to produce a nation of students who can write excellent papers about Socratic arguments, although this is a sensible goal for some institutions. We can, I think, hope to produce a nation full of students like Billy Tucker at Bentley and the many students like him at Reno and St. Lawrence and Harvard and Notre Dame—students who have examined their beliefs Socratically to some extent and who have mastered some techniques by which they can push that inquiry further, students whose moral and political beliefs are not simply a function of talk-radio or peer pressure, students who have gained the confidence that their own minds can confront the toughest questions of citizenship. To produce this independence we need to rely on philosophy.

We live, as did Socrates, in a violent society that sometimes turns its rage against intellectuals. We may be embarking on a new era of anti-intellectualism in American life, an era in which the anger of Aristophanes' father is all too real a force. In response we should defend the democratic value of Socratic citizenship and of the courses through which our students learn how to reason critically in a Socratic way. We should insist, with Socrates and the Stoics, that our campuses, by doing this, provide a vital democratic service; that in Reno, Nevada, and South Bend, Indiana, and Waltham, Massachusetts, as in ancient Athens, the unexamined life threatens the health of democratic freedoms, and the examined life produces vigor in the nation and freedom in the mind.

1. See in particular Roger Kimball, *The Tenured Radicals* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).
2. In 1993, when I visited the campus, Belmont was affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, though it is so no longer.
3. Heraclitus is a possible exception, but he certainly is no democrat.
4. Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* 1.1216a26–39.
5. Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 5.4.10.
6. Plato, *Apology* 20C.
7. *Apology* 30E–31A.
8. *Apology* 38A.
9. See Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge and Ithaca: Cambridge University Press and Cornell University Press, 1991).
10. Lysias, *Against Eratosthenes* (oration 12).
11. See Plato, *Laches, Lysis, Charmides, Euthyphro.*
12. Plato, *Republic* 352D.
13. See Vlastos, *Socrates.*
14. On "deliberative democracy" and its roots in Madison, see, for example, Cass R. Sunstein, *The Partial Constitution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 133–145, 162–194.
15. *Apology* 20AB.
16. On the period, see A. A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy* (London: Duckworth, 1974).
17. Seneca, criticizing himself in *On Anger* 3.36.
18. See Roman Stoic Musonius Rufus, "That Women Too Should Do Philosophy."
19. Not all Stoics were democrats, although Roman Stoicism was frequently associated with republican anti-imperial movements, and Stoic ideas of freedom were frequently appealed to throughout history in justification of anti-imperial acts (not least in the American Revolution).

20. Plato, *Phaedrus* 275A–E.
21. Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.4.13–17.
22. Seneca, *Letter* 33.
23. See E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), who uses the term *cultural literacy* to denote a basic grasp of cultural information that proves necessary to decode other information.
24. For a related argument, see Randall L. Kennedy, "Racial Critiques of Legal Academia," *Harvard Law Review* 102 (1989): 1745–1819.
25. Putnam and Davidson are the closest to Kant, Quine and Goodman in the middle, Rorty at the other extreme.
26. See Louise B. Antony, "Quine as Feminist," in *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity,* ed. Louise B. Antony and Charlotte Witt (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993).
27. See Martha C. Nussbaum, "Skepticism about Practical Reason in Literature and the Law," *Harvard Law Review* 107 (1994), 714–744; and "Sophistry about Conventions," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays in Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 220–229.
28. Amartya Sen, in Steve Pyke's photographic collection *Philosophers,* 2nd ed. (London: zelda cheatle press, 1995), unpaginated.