



## SOCRATIC IGNORANCE: LIFELONG TEACHING AND PHILOSOPHICAL EDUCATION

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This paper explores the ways Socrates defends the wholesome individual, the person who earns moral freedom through an advancing awareness, the person who aims through sustained inquiry to affirm a more comprehensive understanding of educational *ethos*, by liberating those spiritual philosophical and social political processes that empower lifelong teaching as learning. The pedagogical implications of Socrates' way of life are addressed whilst the inquiry shifts into the deeper import divine ignorance comes to bear, through the related terms of *aporia*, *eros*, *arête*, *polis*, and *politics*. These terms mostly ascertain the manner through which the sage of antiquity grounds 'knowledgeable ignorance,' bequeathing transformative *paideia* to self, fellow citizens, and humanity at large. Briefly, the paradox of 'virtue as knowledge' is discussed and so are questions of the eclipse of virtue in modern education. The paper affirms that Socrates' wisdom of ignorance ignites the fire of moral and philosophical education. He definitively revolutionizes knowledge by directly linking moral activity and *arête* to divine unknowing. Socratic philosophizing accentuates 'wise ignorance' to empower lifelong teaching as learning it unravels divine inspiration only to facilitate yet another advent of its truth in education.

**Keywords** Daimonion, Ignorance, Aporia, Virtue, Paideia

Philosophy is perhaps the only discipline where the profession of one's ignorance can signal progress and enlightenment, rather than failure and distress.<sup>1</sup>

In any case it is not so easy to know oneself.<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

It is affirmed here that Socrates's awareness of 'not-knowing' forwards 'a politics of transformation,'<sup>3</sup> clearing pathways to ascertain the educative process coincides with interior realization of ignorance.<sup>4</sup> As such, Socratic education becomes the vehicle for the outpouring into the social and political world of a

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<sup>1</sup> J. Green, "The Morality of Wonder: A Positive Interpretation of Socratic Ignorance," *Polis* 21(1 & 2, 2004): 43-69, 43.

<sup>2</sup> I. Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, L. Infield trans., (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett), 143.

<sup>3</sup> The expression 'politics of transformation' translates to Socrates' *pathos* for philosophy and life—a passion knowing no bounds—a radical politics that unceasingly activates the transformation of religious philosophical, educational and societal norms and values.

<sup>4</sup> All references to Socrates imply Plato's Socrates in the *Apology*, with minimal references to the early Socratic dialogues. I mainly used Grube's translation for Plato's *Apology*. See G. M. A. Grube, "Apology," in J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson eds., *Plato Complete Works* (Indianapolis IN: Hackett, 1997), 17-36. Where appropriate I made changes to better reflect the original Greek text.

wideness of *aporetic* meaning, that transforms our understanding of teaching and learning within an ongoing dialogical background of negative philosophical inquiry. Hence, the Socratic search for truth constitutes an inconclusive, unfinizable endeavor—the *philosophos* standing on the threshold of knowledge and ignorance gradually discovers and recovers the most profound dimensions of his life and thought, at once uncovering through deepest layers of ignorance that ever renewable movement towards the center of the interior life. The educative sojourn toward the center perennially renews the educator's understanding of dialogue, silence, and philosophical questioning; it transforms the educational process. It is a contemplative journey born from dialogical encounter favoring the interior power of the word to dialogically penetrate inform and transform self and the social political arenas, towards a greater loftier human aim. Socratic philosophical education highlights what benefits the collective through the realized *humanitas* of *homo humanus*, aims to creatively generate non-institutional *spoude* and *paideia* beyond the cloistered compounds of normative education. Essentially, Socratic *paideia* enacts knowledge sprouting from ignorance, forwards transformation by the power of trans-subjective and inter-subjective freedom,—unfinizable pedagogical moral truth and justice.

This paper emphasizes Socrates' exemplary *ethos* his prototypical philosophic way of life in view of obscured and controversial questions regarding his *atopic* positioning toward *paideia* and politics.<sup>5</sup> It claims that Socrates' *eros* for the god his profession of ignorance his strangeness and *atopia* give way to paradoxical activity allowing him to creatively inhabit and resolve tensions and contradictions of self-other and society. The virtue of his paradoxical practice clears customary outdated and secluded conceptions of truth establishing the aim of philosophical education to be wholesome pedagogical praxis, reconciling in-itself *homo religiosus*, *homo philosophicus*, and *homo politicus*. Socrates defends the wholesome individual, the person who earns moral freedom through an advancing awareness, the person who aims through sustained inquiry to affirm a more comprehensive understanding of educational *ethos*, by liberating those spiritual philosophical and social political processes that empower lifelong teaching as learning.

Indeed, Socrates' wisdom of ignorance ignites the fire of moral and philosophical education is inseparable from them. In the final reckoning, his philosophizing (*philosophounta* – *Ap.* 23a5) discloses creative ways to abruptly subvert injustice for the sake of the public good. It ought to be emphasized at the outset that his search for the real, (translating to *politics of transformation* accomplished by non-conventional political means<sup>6</sup>), grounds that inwardly directed moral power dedicated to the advancement of philosophical *paideia* and culture for the sole betterment of society. His impassioned examination of self and others was not reserved for his own benefit or for his inner circle of friends rather aimed at benefiting his fellow citizens and transforming humanity at large. As such, the Socratic pedagogy of 'wise ignorance' bequeaths a lifelong journey of transformative knowledge, of virtue ensuing from *exetasis* (examination) solely for the benefit of public life and the common good. Of Socrates, Emerson says:

When we consider how much this individual fulfilled the great duty which every man owes to his fellow men,—that of crowding into a little life the most extended benefit, and contributing the strength of his soul to the aggrandizement of the species,—we shall acknowledge that few men can cope with him.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Ultimately Socrates' positioning toward *paideia* and politics aims toward the education of the interior/-exterior *politeia*.

<sup>6</sup> Although not a politician Socrates was a political *aner* a man well informed and aware of the political realities of the Athens of his day. His dialogical encounters in the *agora* and elsewhere with all kinds of wisdom pretenders culminating to his trial and execution are the non-conventional political means, through which he brings transformation to the political affairs of the *polis*.

<sup>7</sup> R. W. Emerson, *Representative Men* (London, UK: Dent, 1908), 93. Cf. D. Knox, "Socrates: The First Professor," *Innovative Higher Education* 28 (2, 1998): 115-126, 125. Knox concludes his paper telling us that "higher education and society today can still use people who follow the example of Socrates (*ibid.*)."

## Socratic Ignorance as Educative Way of Life

For Socrates education is founded on ‘learned ignorance’; aims to better hear attune and align to the subtle ministrations of contemplative thought born of *aporetic* silence—and to the superior wisdom of deity: that unknowable spiritual power *principio*, the intelligence guiding our insights and life’s very movements. According to the father of inquiry, since human knowledge is lacking in matters of the good and the noble (*ta Kala kai Agatha* – *Ap.* 23d) the most appropriate stance is to know your ignorance (23a-c). Hence, the *philosophos* lover of wisdom constantly learns to transcend positive knowledge in favour of relearning ‘knowledgeable ignorance.’ In fact, the philosopher-educator stands in-between knowledge and ignorance. Transformative ignorance ignites inquiry guides learning empowers moral insight and issues forth genuine knowledge. Through ignorance unknowing and unknowability, learning and unlearning *arête* and true knowledge are granted. Precisely this foundational body of spiritual knowledge impossible to be known in *toto*, Socrates claims to have partial knowledge of *qua* ignorance. However, ‘knowledgeable ignorance’ cannot be taught; the best a good teacher/educator can hope for is to keep learning ways to initiate the student directly to the *aporetic* life of philosophy, as well as to the state/event of ignorance manifesting-itself. In time, without the educator’s assistance the *educandus* becomes accustomed to continuous learning and the curious interplay of knowledge and ignorance; composing in the Socratic sense a *Bildung* of being-ness and fulfillment.

The Socratic educator (in-between teacher-learner) engages transformative pedagogics steeped in personal encounter, dialogue, philosophical inquiry, *eros* and *enthusiasmos* (to be filled with the deity, *theion ti daimonion ti* —, something godly, ingenious). The apex of Socrates’ educational activity involves deep listening to *daimonion*’s moral movements of most subtle silence, Socrates’ customary divine sign (*Ap.* 40c2) involuntarily sent to him since childhood (*ek paidos* – by ‘o *theos*’ (40b1), the *semeion* sign that reduces his unwarranted speech or action to silence, stopping his tracks when about to act in a morally reprehensible way (31d3-4, 40c1-2), even in small matters (40a4-6).<sup>8</sup> To *daimonion*, brings Socrates to a halt grounding the moral force and all knowledge negatively; in care of the good it prevents by *apotreptic* and *elenctic* knowledge what may cause harm.<sup>9</sup> *Daimonic* activity empowers the teacher as continuous learner to search and research the arduous path of *arête* and never ending wisdom. There is no universal meaning of *arête* (Roman *virtus*), virtue excellence its ontological status as positive power of being guides the teacher—lifelong learner—along the *aporetic* paths of *episteme* self-knowledge and moral excellence. Socrates’ advantage over others (who, may indeed know many fine things in accord to their craft or science), is that their specialized knowledge mistakenly makes them believe to know *ta Kala kai Agatha*, thus their positive claims to knowledge in and of themselves bar exclude or else make atrophic existential learning philosophical inquiry and transformative *paideia*.

His method best explores existential modalities of dialectical teaching/learning exemplifies above all the *praxis* of moral knowledge; hence, the ethical equivocates the good actualized (the *prakton*), and the livable (the *bioteon*), that is the knowledge *ethos* of how to live and die well. The ontological power of Socrates’ method has for nigh a long time held an unparalleled and exemplary status in teaching methodologies, because it has proven to be that modality of teaching which best brings total and unqualified transformation to the whole person and to the educational process, harmonizing method and content without divorcing knowledge from the human *bios*. In effect, his method constitutes a

<sup>8</sup> Two outstanding works on the Socratic *daimonion* are P. Desirée and N. D. Smith eds., *Socrates’ Divine Sign: Religion, Practice, and Value in Socratic Philosophy*, Published in *Apeiron*, XXXVIII (2, 2005); and N. D. Smith and P. B. Woodruff eds., *Reason and Religion in Socratic Philosophy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2000). Also see T. C. Brickhouse and N. D. Smith, *Platos’ Socrates* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1994), 189-94; M. F. Burnyeat, “The Impiety of Socrates,” *Ancient Philosophy* 17 (1, 1997): 1-12; L. A. Dorion, “Socrate, le *daimonion* et la divination,” in J. Laurent ed., *Les dieux de Platon* (Caen, FR: Presses Universitaires de Caen, 2003), 169-92. (Actes du colloque organisé à l’Université de Caen Basse-Normandie les 24-26 Janvier, 2002); M. L. McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates* (University Park, PE: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 185-90.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. P. E. Michaelides, “Ethics *qua* the Divine: Inflections of Otherness in Socrates,” *Phronimon* 9 (1, 2008): 57-76.

paradigmatic pedagogics that seems to have held its timeless reign in the context of *paideia* ever since classical antiquity, precisely because the *philosophos* turned his life into a guiding philosophy.

Samons accurately observes:

I would suppose that if Socrates had said and thought everything we believe he said and thought, but had thrown down his shield and run away during an Athenian battle, or actually turned over the innocent Leon of Salamis to the Thirty Tyrants when they attempted to involve him in their assassinations (*Ap.* 32c-d), or allowed his healthy young friends to make him a man of means instead of a relative pauper (31c, 33a), or fled from Athens after his fellow citizens passed a sentence of death on him, we might not even know the *name* Socrates. His character, I am suggesting, served as an essential quality for his status as the foundational thinker in the western philosophical tradition. *Socrates' integrity and the real affection and concern he showed for his friends and polis made him a teacher of virtue*, whatever he and his fellows believed about the precise definition of *arête*.<sup>10</sup>

Socrates himself claims that part of his divine mission is to “never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I find myself in your company, [...] approaching each one of you like a father and an elder brother to persuade you all to take care of *arête*” (*Ap.* 30e-31a). But mostly it is by his virtuous example that Socrates taught his fellow citizens. His philosophy is a way of life it bespeaks and inaugurates a good inspiring and virtuous life.

Vasili determines that Socrates taught us a philosopher’s best friend is his philosophy. He clarifies:

The father of philosophy remained true to his philosophy. Socrates embodied the experience of being with his philosophy that is his existential philosophical legacy. One is not duty bound to follow in his philosophical footsteps, one is duty bound to be true to one’s philosophy, or to one’s own self be true. Was this not the message Socrates taught? Socrates learned from his own experience and that he professed not knowing very well.<sup>11</sup>

However, the only stipulation placed on bearing a true philosophy and being true to one’s self is to be knowledgeable about ignorance. Thus only the *bios* undergoing *exetasis* constant scrutiny and review is worth living: *ho de anexetastos bios ou biōtos anthrōpō*—the unexamined life is not liveable by humans (*Ap.* 38a).

Philosophy in the Socratic sense pursues the examined way of life enables one to act for their benefit to live a good life, but above all it enables one to act in the most appropriate way to benefit others. According to Plato, Socrates demonstrates among his contemporaries an unequalled passion for philosophical questioning that cannot but arise from a direct and intimate relation with the divine. He exemplifies and honours the path to self-knowledge *vis-à-vis* the divine because he is well aware that we humans are capable of emerging as carers of the soul, true carers of self and others, only if we are able to sustain the inquiry of inquiry unto an unending moral and spiritual questioning of self, others, and of divinity.

### **Divine Ignorance: *Aporia*, *Eros*, *Arête*, *Polis*, and Politics**

Socratic *aporia* is ultimately oriented toward *aporia* par excellence the ever unsolvable aporetics of what the wisdom of the god might be; but, all *aporias* disclose a spontaneously emergent questioning of what

<sup>10</sup> L. J. Samons II, “Socrates, Virtue, and the Modern Professor,” *Boston University Journal of Education* 182 (2, 2000): 19-27, 23. Also see J. Green, “The Morality of Wonder,” 43-69. Green devotes a whole page elucidating the remarkable events of what he calls Socrates’ fascinating life and tells us that it is these “events which have earned Socrates ethical praise for over two millennia.” Most interestingly, Green considers these events constitute “Acts of Ignorance or the Ethics of Wonder” (62). In effect, one may say that the remarkable events of Socrates’ life constitute ethical acts arising out of ‘knowledgeable ignorance’ or else constitute an Ethics of Ignorance.

<sup>11</sup> J. Vasili, “What is a Philosopher’s Best Friend?,” *Existential Analysis* 15 (1, 2004): 95-108, 96.



human wisdom might existentially accomplish here and now in the moral domain—for the sake of others—when empowered by *theion ti*, *daimonion ti*.<sup>12</sup>

Socrates' disavowal of knowledge enables him to live with no other power than that of the deity and its divine sign (*to tou theou sēmeion*—*Ap.* 40b1) working through the dynamics of his personality. The divine is the true measure of his *atopia* it also seems to be the ground of his *eironeia* (irony) and also the ground which enables the *coincidentia oppositorum* in his extraordinary personality. The divine has nothing to do with Socrates himself, his own volition or his fascinating personality rather it has all to do with that something of divinity concealed within him.<sup>13</sup>

E. De Strycker tells us that Socrates'

devotion to God is his willingness to sacrifice all his personal interests in order to fulfil his mission. He is perfectly satisfied in being nothing but a sign-post by which the God points the way every man should go to reach true understanding and *eudaimonia*. This earnest and unobtrusive religious devotion gives the personality of Socrates, through the whole of the *Apology*, its depth and its mystery [...]. Although Socrates' personality is unique, what Plato emphasizes is not its uniqueness as such, but rather what is typical of man who is a being inferior to God, but capable of discovering his own deficiencies and of striving to improve himself.<sup>14</sup>

For Socrates whose life is devoted first and foremost to the god to whom he offers his allegiance and obeisance, to strive for self-improvement presupposes to be selflessly dedicated to the improvement of his fellow citizens.<sup>15</sup> The depth and mystery of Socrates is a demonstration of someone completely and selflessly obeys the decrees and dispensations of the divine and this, because his life's journey has been an unequivocal witnessing and acceptance of the recurrent and irrefutable mystery of divine intervention for the common good.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. P. E. Michaelides, "Socratic Ignorance and *Aporia*: What the Wisdom of the God Might Be?," in K. Boudouris ed., *Greek Philosophy and the Issues of our Age* (Athens, GR: Ionia Publications, 2009), 146-159.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. G. Grote, *Plato and Other Companions of Socrates* Vol. I, (London: Elibron Classics Replica Edition, 2005). Grote, referring to "the impressive and eccentric personality of Socrates" says that he was a "character original and unique, to whose peculiar mode of working on other minds I scarcely know a parallel in history" (preface iv). Four pages down, he tells us that Socrates' "peculiar gift was that of cross-examination or the application of his *Elenchus* to discriminate pretended from real knowledge" (pref. viii). On the same page, Grote says: "he [Socrates] placed the negative in the front of his procedure; giving to it a point, an emphasis, a substantive value, which no one had done before" (my brackets). But it is important to highlight that Socrates' impressive personality and his historically unparalleled "peculiar mode of working on other minds" through the *elenchus* —or through "the gift of cross-examination" as Grote rightly puts it—, is not merely dependent on affirmative or on critical *elenctically* reasoned truth rather on divinity itself, that which first engifts Socrates with his peculiar mode of *elenchus* ('the negative gift of divinity placed in the front of his reasoned procedure'), engifting him ultimately with his monitory divine sign (the negative involuntary prohibition *par excellence*). Elsewhere, following the insight of L. Brisson ["Socrates and the Divine Signal according to Plato's Testimony: Philosophical Practice as Rooted in Religious Tradition," in Desirée and Smith eds., *Socrates' Divine Sign*, 1-12] that "rational activity is framed by divine intervention, which fixes its limits and orients it" (12), I have argued that "*elenctic* questioning compliments on a rational level what Socrates already knows by virtue of *daimonion*, hence: his perpetual state of *aporia* in search for the virtuous, the just and the holy" (Michaelides, "Ethics *qua* the Divine," 68). For Socrates, "the divine is the *conditio sine qua non* of *aporia par excellence*, determining the opening and the boundaries of the *elenctic* circumstance as well as guiding the pathways of the concrete encounter with others through the *apotreptic* monitions of *daimonion*" (ibid.). And again: "*elenctic* questioning in the early Socratic dialogues usually ends in *aporia*, but it seems to reflect the kind of impasse reached by the inability of critical reason to resolve the paradox of the relation of human knowledge to divine wisdom" (ibid.).

<sup>14</sup> S. J., E. De Strycker, *Plato's Apology of Socrates: A Literary and Philosophical Study with a Running Commentary* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 73.

<sup>15</sup> De Strycker (*Plato's Apology of Socrates*) points out that Plato in the *Apology* from 28a on shows Socrates' "devotion to the well-being of his fellow citizens, indeed of all people he meets" (73).

In effect, Socrates' philosophical questioning opens the world to an *aporetic* wideness of meaning mirroring the unknowable sign of divinity in the excess of its negative orientation impetus and moral direction. His *atopia* therefore finds its genesis and *topos* in the radical interventions of *daimonion* that unequivocally frame and orient critical awareness and reasoned argumentation in the negative, reducing all rational cognitive and interpretative activity to *aporetic* questioning. The *daimonion*, wholly asymmetrical utterly non-rational and mysterious, constitutes the crux of Socrates' enigmatic profession of ignorance; it initiates his perpetual state of *aporia* through seemingly paradoxical activity.

Undoubtedly, the negative divine sign constitutes the *axis mundi* of his religious-philosophical activity, hence his unequivocal obedience to its repeated *apotreptic* warnings to enter conventional Athenian politics (*Ap.* 31d). Notwithstanding, it is by non-conventional politics that Socrates' divine mission becomes identical to his philosophical and social mission. In effect, his notorious searches after virtue edify genuine concern for social justice driving his investigations to the public places of Athens. As the city's gadfly he constantly urges fellow citizens to take care for the soul, keeping it in a virtuous state. His uncompromising dialogical passion for knowledge overcomes class boundaries and professions to include the whole spectrum of Athenians: slaves, craftsmen, and aristocrats; politicians, poets, rhetoricians, and sophists. He works untiringly from within the thick context of the *agora* ceaselessly transforming ignorances into the light of day. Thus, he confronts on a daily basis the confines of socio-political discourse, subverting ossified belief outdated norms and the reigning opinions (or *doxai*).

As tradition has it, he is very much grounded in the community of the everyday roaming the streets of Athens barefoot in perpetual presence of the holy. He meanders around the busy and bustling *agora* the meeting of roads mixing with tradespeople, labourers, farmers and cobblers, engaging and questioning people of all kind citizens and foreigners.

He traces his occupation of doing so back to the oracle, the divine channel which disclosed his own ignorance. His vocation as philosopher begins in divinely inspired 'knowledgeable ignorance', commencing as it were through single-minded contemplation of the Delphic pronouncement that there is *no other man* wiser than he (21a). His relentless testing of the Delphic proclamation's veracity initiates a perplexity and *aporia* which ripples outwardly—enveloping all and nothing—culminating in the firm realization that the negative divine sign gives rise to one and only certainty in knowledge, to one positive outcome: the confidence that the wisdom of the god is far superior to human knowledge: "it is really the god who is wise" (*Ap.* 23a5).

Socrates neither feigns nor assumes ignorance rather his claim to "know that he does not know" (21d3-7) is straightforwardly sincere. He knows in earnest that he is "not wise at all" (21b4) although he is likely to be wiser than those thus far tested, only "to this small extend" (21d6): he does not think he knows what he does not; he understands "that his wisdom is worthless" (23b3) before the superior wisdom of the deity. Effectually, his transcendently direct realization of the negative excess of so-called divine ignorance (unknowing), leads him to espouse the truth that his wisdom is worth "little or nothing" (23b1). His open admittance of ignorance bears his acute consciousness of deficiency in matters of virtue but mostly carries the in-definitiveness of moral knowledge as such. To put it otherwise, the fundamentally imperfect understanding of humans makes all assertoric truth concerning matters of virtue flawed, "definitive knowledge of virtue belongs to the god (23a5-6), not men, and the ultimate wisdom allowed to humans is awareness of their lack of such knowledge."<sup>16</sup>

However, more positively, as Green puts it, knowledge of one's deficiency in moral matters brings forth 'the morality of wonder.' More so, Socrates holds "a privileged relationship to ignorance" and "an equally privileged insight into the very knowledge he understands himself to lack." Continuing, Green says:

Socrates clearly demonstrates that the state of mind that accompanies the recognition that one does not possess knowledge of the highest things is not simply the paralysis of perplexity and confusion, but, additionally, the inspirational experiences of

<sup>16</sup> S. Yonezawa, "Socrates' Conception of Philosophy," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 12 (1, 2004): 1-22, 1.

wonder (*thauma*) and love (*eros*). Thus, the realization of one's ignorance is not an altogether sobering or disillusioning event: one can legitimately speak of a kind of enchantment with coming to awareness that one is lacking the highest wisdom.<sup>17</sup>

In any case, Socrates' moral acumen bears the puzzling ambiguity and remoteness of the oracle's riddle, is enchanted and reinforced by the enigmatic otherness of the preventive voice of *daimonion*; both, foregrounding his ethical relation to others and otherness. The alleged wisdom and *ethos* of every person (every other) Socrates encounters establishes his relation to otherness *qua* the deity; it is essentially an erotic relation with the radical otherness of the other. It is a pre-ontological relation with *daimonion* with that which is *other* than reason in all ways superseding and enhancing it but not in conflict with it.

Rooted in otherness, Socratic *eros* points the way to the god. But the god speaks profoundly in silence in effect is silence-in-itself. The *daimonion* either speaks by tramping Socrates' action (even in small matters) reducing to silence, or else speaks by its very silence through lack of intervention as on the day of his trial (*Ap.* 40b-d). Either way, the god grounds and confirms the good and virtuous *ex silencio*. This perpetual presence of the silent god (*eros*) and its *daimonic* interventions or lack of them makes Socrates recognize the magnitude of his ignorance, leading him step by step to apprehend his investigations to be "in service of the god" (22a4); his search to be guided along the pathways "the god bade" him (23b5); his *elenctic* mission to come "to the god's assistance" (23b7); his incessant questioning to exemplify the life of a philosopher "as the god ordered" him (28e4); for it is "the god" that "has placed" him in the city (30e6); and he remained "attached" to it "by the god" (30e3); so finally, he leaves it only to "the god to judge" him (35d7). Before the god's wisdom all knowledge is in principle philosophically questionable. Only divinity itself remains unquestionable, precedent unknowable. Thus, the deity is to be obeyed at all times whether it intervenes through *daimonion* oracles and dreams or any other form of divination (33c4-7).

Saunders says that for "Socrates philosophy is morals, philosophy is politics, and philosophy is life."<sup>18</sup> But life not a value-in-itself is divine *eros*, that unknowable yet miraculous power igniting *aporia*: the moral drive for knowledge at the very heart of humanity. Socratic *eros*—ultimately "expressed by the element *philo-* in the compound word *philosophos*"<sup>19</sup>—, manifests-itself as divinely inspired *pathos* for questioning, exemplifies the love of inquiry so central to Plato's *Apology* (and the entire Platonic *corpus*). Most importantly, *eros* (unceasing philosophical inquiry, essentially love for the god) draws divinity and virtue near, disclosing to humans their long lost humanity. It bestows the gift of holy ignorance that utterly silent foundation of all knowledge and learning that grants the gifts of self-knowledge and scrutiny of circumstance. *Eros* ignites (*qua* 'wise or divine ignorance') philosophical questioning *elenchos* and *exetasis*—igniting evermore *thaumasmos*, transformation and renewal—by founding and unfounding: positioning and repositioning, envisioning and revisioning, learning unlearning and re-learning. It is the ubiquitous power issuing forth the moral force necessitating that one through critical and creative enactment question after wisdom, unceasingly putting to the test the *ethos* of what they professes to know.

Uprising *eros*, the drive for knowledge grounds the *philosophos* between knowledge and unknowing, directing emphasis on unknowing—, the knowledge that one's wisdom is worth "little or nothing" (23b1). Socrates' disavowal of knowledge, his *aporia enthousiasmos* and *atopia* issuing forth his religiosity and philosophical *ethos*, animate context and circumstance through constant inquiry of self and other: law and character, the plurality of perspectives, the manner of lives lived. As such, Socratic ignorance igniting *eros* evermore, knows no bounds for unknowing reinvigorates *ethos gnosis* and *episteme*—*paideia*, *téchne*, *politiké*, *economia*, *dikaio*—making central the human and social dimensions of learning and community. Thenceforth, Socratic philosophical activity untiringly questions through dialogue and direct

<sup>17</sup> J. Green, "The Morality of Wonder," 48. Green maintains that Socratic ignorance *vis-à-vis* "Socrates' claim not to have knowledge of the 'highest things', raises the possibility that there is a body of truth to be discovered along these lines" (43), generating in him moral requirements that invigorate a positive sense of philosophic wonder stemming not from knowledge of objects but from his claim to be "knowledgeable about ignorance" (45-46).

<sup>18</sup> T. J. Saunders trans., *Early Socratic Dialogues* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 34.

<sup>19</sup> De Strycker, *Plato's Apology of Socrates*, 64.

encounter the maneuvers of uprising *eros*, grounding the ministrations of the moral drive (*arête*) in society and its political institutions.

Socrates definitively revolutionizes knowledge by directly linking moral activity and *arête* to divine unknowing. Association with the god issues forth the wisdom of knowledgeable ignorance: a kind of knowing-ness in unknowing; or else, the open *topos* of birth from which virtue manifests-itself. Accordingly, ‘knowledge is virtue’<sup>20</sup> it ensues in unknowing and exemplifies the positive power of being. Moral action and *arête* are neither solely a matter of cultivation nor can they be defined understood or comprehended by rational means; instead they are to be apprehended beyond the boundaries of the knowable in direct relation to deity. Excellence therefore ensues directly from divinity, and the arena of testing *arête* foregrounds the mystery of dialogue and direct encounter against the backdrop of the opening of world and circumstance.

Socrates’ negative manifestation of deity establishes that conquest lies not in knowledge: craft-knowledge rational scientific technical or technological knowledge.<sup>21</sup> Rather, it lays in virtue the negative excess of neither knowing nor unknowing but that which bears a coincidence of both in the pre-ontological arising of form and formlessness, meaning and meaninglessness, the opening of world and wordlessness. Therein *arête* manifests in-silence the positive power *that is* knowledge.

Socratic *eros* ignites *arête* by questing after the divinity that imparts it. The early Socratic dialogues make clear that the question ‘what is virtue’ (either temperance courage piety justice) resolves in irreconcilable *aporia*. There is no conclusive essentialist or universal explanation of the nature of virtue; the question is not solely a matter of what virtue is but whence it comes from. For Socrates, all *aporias* regarding virtue culminate “in the *aporetics* of what the wisdom of the god might be.”<sup>22</sup> This ever renewable question demonstrates the magnanimity of Socratic knowledge (albeit of ignorance) distinguishing Socrates’ call to self-transcendence as most radical, indeed making him a sophist more appropriately an exemplar *philosophos* initiating a substantive rupture with ancient Greek thinking and culture, perhaps with all extant knowledge and things past.

His *praxis* in virtue, ‘he would rather suffer injustice than give it out’ (*Grg.* 469c1-2), outrightly challenges Homer’s and Hesiod’s mythological conception of justice which has *Dike* doll out good for

<sup>20</sup> The Socratic paradox of ‘virtue is knowledge’ (discussed in the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*) is better clarified further down in the section titled: ‘The Teaching of *Arête*.’

<sup>21</sup> It is important to clarify the failure of comprehending the question of virtue in its relation to ‘knowledgeable ignorance’ on purely objective or epistemic grounds (that also includes scientific knowledge). Green (“The Morality of Wonder”) aptly says: “The natural and social sciences are hardly unfamiliar with ignorance, but here it is usually the case that ignorance is simply a void, the absence of knowledge, and thus no more than a temporary placeholder for future discovery and understanding (43).” He goes on to say that whereas for philosophy knowledgeable ignorance may “signal progress and enlightenment,” for the sciences the case is reversed: from nothing nothing comes and nothing can be inferred. *Ex nihilo nihil*. The paradox occurs when we try to understand the ‘no-thing’ or ignorance by turning it into an object of thought. At any rate, the epistemic dimension of ignorance is represented by Socrates’ *elenctic* questioning that always seems to lead to *aporia*, impasse, or lack of resource. The Socratic *elenchus*, the sequence of questioning and answering, or else critical rationality cannot resolve the question of what knowledge or virtue is. It consistently leads to the utterly negative status of *a-poria* vis-à-vis the experiences of impasse, or lack of resource, accompanied by the psychological experiences of irritation, failure, distress, resentment, perplexity. This negative side of *aporia* essentially mirrors the experience of the sciences where nothingness is perceived as the dead emptiness of a void, a complete lack of resource. Hence, the negativity of *aporetic* thinking signals the distress of trying to comprehend the void of ignorance on epistemic grounds. In order to apprehend the positive side of *aporia* contradictorily knowledge must bear no object. Thus paradoxically one has to give up the claim to knowledge which is precisely what Socrates does. Obviously the natural and social sciences cannot accept this. But the paradox presents no problem when the void or ignorance is understood non-cognitively, that is from the philosophical spiritual dimension or perspective. For a discussion on the failure to understand knowledge of one’s ignorance on purely epistemic or psychological grounds see M. MacKenzie, “The Virtues of Socratic Ignorance,” *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, 38(2, 1988): 331-50, 332-37.

<sup>22</sup> Michaelides, “Socratic Ignorance and *Aporia*,” 151.



good and evil for evil.<sup>23</sup> He repeatedly repudiates banal sentiments infusing popular Greek theology poetry and tragedy that essentially turn the human into a puppet of the gods their elliptical, often unjust and conflicting emotions and decrees. By contrast, he finds the superior wisdom of the god neither rewards nor punishes; simply just humans well established in the truth of the deity enjoy virtue and all good things. The virtuous person bears the responsibility of good and bad actions attaining a proper relation to the divine solely by their own efforts in philosophizing.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, Socrates' dialogical calling to self-transcendence, modeled in the negative after his *daimonic* interventions, initiates abrupt transformation in the affairs of the *polis* (city-state) threatening the community's norms and standards. In promoting the "god's moralizing agenda" he essentially opens "war with the city and its values."<sup>25</sup> Outrightly, he tells his *dikasts* (those upholding justice): the one "who genuinely opposes you or any other populace and prevents many unjust and illegal things from happening in the state," will not survive for long (*Ap.* 31e-32a). And again: "who knows what that virtue is that is appropriate to a man and a citizen" (20b)? Moreover, he makes clear that "it is not from wealth that virtue comes, but from virtue excellence come wealth and all other good things for men, both in private and in public" (30b).

Most importantly, as his philosophical vocation is solely at the service of transcendent wisdom beyond speech and erudition, he steadfastly tells his *dikasts*: "I will be persuaded by the god rather than by you" (*Peisomai de mallon to theo a humin* – 29d2-3). Socrates never doubts the manner of his defense rather asks his *dikasts* to judge according to the law and their oaths. He admonishes them: "direct your mind as to whether I speak justly or not for that is the excellence of a judge" (18a). But as it stands, he needs no external judges; there is divine confirmation for the goodness of his actions: the silence of *daimonion* on the day of his trial speaks for itself. Miraculously,

at his trial, the *apotreptic* power of his *daimonion* is transformed into something extraordinarily positive disclosing to him *ex silencio* that "something good" (*Ap.* 40b6) which is the lot of just humans well established in the truth of the deity. Socrates is able to die convinced that he never willingly wronged anyone (37a4-5); aware that death is no evil (40b6-7) for a just man but a blessing; knowing all too well that his accusers by imputing the death sentence will harm themselves more than him for a just man cannot be harmed by worse men (30c6-d2); convinced "that a good man cannot be harmed either in life or in death, and that his affairs are not neglected by the gods" (41d2). The complete lack of intervention by *daimonion* before and during his trial confirms circumstance and the rightness of his defence demonstrating his adamant faith in that "something good" (40b1) initiated through the silence of divinity (40d4-5), the good that his enacted piety brought forth and his philosophising attested to and was an elucidation of.<sup>26</sup>

Socrates' philosophic *eros* activates the *ergon* of *paideia* empowering civic virtue however becomes fully catalytic in this direction by way of his death. His religious fervor and his philosophic way of life—*eros* for inquiry at the boundaries of the knowable, the inquiry of inquiry, along with the circumstances leading to his trial and his fearless stance before the death conviction—awaken the question of justice in the sphere of the *polis* grounding philosophy politics and truth in civic virtue dignity and *ethos*. On one hand his religiosity is unprecedentedly fueled by the silence of the god, and on the other hand his speech and *elenctic* questioning is fueled by its very philosophic truth; it bears the power of radical intervention

<sup>23</sup> Cf. J. F. McGlew, *Tyranny and Political Culture in Ancient Greece* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 57-59.

<sup>24</sup> The acceptance of personal responsibility in and of itself rules out any interpretations based on Socratic cult (as in 'religious cult'—or the religious adoration of a charismatic figure).

<sup>25</sup> J. Bussanich, "Socrates and Religious Experience," in S. Ahpel-Rappe and R. Kamtekar eds., *A Companion to Socrates* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 205.

<sup>26</sup> Michaelides, "Socratic Ignorance and *Aporia*," 146-147.

engifting political life from the ground up. As such, deep silence and insightful speech come to bear in civic affairs their own transformative impetus *politik*.

*Eros* for the good in the Socratic sense points the way to the highest philosophic *ethos* transforming us into better citizens and serious political philosophers.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, Socrates' way of facing death first generates *politike philosophia* radically accentuating the primeval paradox between the individual and community values, a paradox still very alive and unresolved in our pluralistic democracies today. Kronick says:

The paradox is that the philosopher's vision of truth is, as Socrates demonstrates, private and singular, but it must be tested in public before the court of opinion. Socrates tries to convince the Athenian court that his private vision contains a universal truth. His failure to do so exemplifies the conflict between philosophy and politics, but it did not exempt him from obeying the law. The soul of the philosopher may be singular, but as a citizen, the inhabitant of a body, the philosopher is a member of the plurality, the *polis*. When Socrates refused to flee Athens and escape his sentence, he confirmed that private persons cannot contravene the law.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, Eva T.H. Brann, in *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic* says:

*In extremis*, radical reflection and civic reverence might indeed appear to be irreconcilable, yet the founder of all inquiry reconciled them precisely in his death: He was condemned to die because he refused to cease asking questions, and he was executed because he declined to flout his city's laws by running away.<sup>29</sup>

The universal truth of Socrates' religico-philosophical activity poses a perennial challenge to subsequent political philosophy. By accepting death and the obvious limit of law (*nomos*) he resolves perhaps once and for all the paradoxes of 'private-singular' 'communal-plural,' bringing a *coincidentia oppositorum* between 'radical reflection' and 'civic reverence.' Most notably, his *daimonic* religiosity empowered by divine *eros* overcomes in power of insight the collective *nomoi* and *archai* of the *polis*. However, as *dikaioi polites* bearing the weight of a purposive *telos* he succumbs to the limit of *nomos* though at once surpasses it by far in fearless stance. He opts for death favoring the greater moral demand and *ethos* of philosophic truth and justice: thus acts decisively for the good of the *polis* and the human collective more generally.

Socrates' philosophical and social-political activity is informed framed and given its orientation by his divine mission: that *pathos* of enacted religiosity aiming at good results. He discovers the *pathos* for the good in the *eros* of everydayness inaugurating selfless service to fellow humans. Ultimately, he heralds the truth that philosophizing must bear the internal aim of justice-for-all. Hence, his philosophizing constitutes transformative inquiry for the sake of the community, requires that politics is informed animated and ethicized by the *aporetic* life of dialogical philosophy. Here, critical

<sup>27</sup> For the ways Socratic philosophizing enhances citizenship forwards civic virtue see R. E. Allan, *Socrates and Legal Obligation* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); H. Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," *Social Research* 57 (1, 1990): 73-103; T. C. Brickhouse and N. D. Smith, "Socrates and the Laws of Athens," *Philosophical Compass* 1 (6, 2006): 564-70, and *The Trial and Execution of Socrates* (Oxford, UK, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 133-278; D. D. Corey, "Socratic Citizenship: Delphic Oracle and Divine Sign," *Review of Politics* 67 (2, 2005): 201-28; R. Kraut, *Socrates and the State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); M. Lutz, "Civic Virtue and Socratic Virtue," *Polity* 29 (4, 1997): 565-95; M. Nussbaum, "Education for Citizenship in an Era of Global Connection," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 21 (4/5, 2002): 289-303; M. J. Rosano, "Citizenship and Socrates in Plato's *Crito*," *The Review of Politics* 62 (3, 2002): 451-77; D. L. Simpson, "Is Socrates the Ideal Democratic Citizen?," *Journal of Thought* 41 (4, 2006): 137-56; D. Villa, *Socratic Citizenship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); J. R. Wallah, "Socratic Citizenship," *History of Political Thought* 9 (3, 1988): 393-413.

<sup>28</sup> J. G. Kronick, "The Death of Theory and the Example of Socrates," *Southwest Review* 91 (2006): 457-58.

<sup>29</sup> E. Brann, "The Offence of Socrates: A Re-Reading of Plato's *Apology*," *Interpretation* 7 (1978): 1-21.

consciousness backed up by *daimonion* works within the parameters of truth and unknowability to defend above all justice and freedom of speech and thought<sup>30</sup>

Socrates follows ‘the god’s’ bidding to assist the divine by benefiting public life through radical intervention and questioning: ‘a politics of transformation’ established in proper relation to the deity’s negative determination. His *daimonion* promotes justice in fidelity to circumstance bespeaks the unceasing *ergon* of philosophical *paideia* that is bequeaths genuine knowledge political *ethos* and civic virtue. Bearing the torch of new spiritual truth he causes a definite break with old habits, false opinions, outdated norms, ancient laws, and set doctrines. His philosophical activity constitutes an internal affair between the individual and the deity appears to manifest-itself at odds with communal life. But ultimately, it constitutes a movement towards radical interiority and self-transcendence for the sake of the *polis* and the human community as such.

### The Teaching of *Arête*

In the *Protagoras* (319a, ff.) and *Meno* (70a, ff.) Socrates seems to find that virtue is neither definable nor teachable, nor can it be acquired by practice. Paradoxically, as he is famed to claim ‘virtue is knowledge.’ But if virtue is knowledge must it not in some way be teachable? Perhaps yes and again perhaps it is not. In the *Meno*, virtue is “prudence” or “knowledge” (89a3-5, c2-4) these terms are used interchangeably by Socrates, though toward the end of the dialogue he proposes that virtue is mysteriously generated through “divine inspiration” (92c6-7, 99c1-10). Actually, ‘divine inspiration’ is a kind of madness (*theia mania*) not unlike *daimonion*, that something ingenious that comes upon Socrates. Of course, ‘divine inspiration’ (madness) can only be divinely sanctioned thus is unteachable; after all, contradictorily, divine authority sanctioned by the divine cannot be taught, is divinely sanctioned and inspired. But at any rate virtue cannot be taught for it cannot be defined<sup>31</sup>

Ultimately, the human deficiency to definitive knowledge of virtue makes it lack an object, renders virtue objectless. The claim then that ‘virtue is knowledge’ contradictorily becomes ‘knowledge without an object’: knowing of not-knowing tantamount to unknowing. Or better virtue is knowledge of ignorance perhaps divine ignorance. But since the question of virtue excludes knowledge of objects it cannot be resolved on epistemic grounds. It appears that Green is right objectless virtue belongs to the Morality of Wonder.<sup>32</sup> That is, if virtue and knowledge of ignorance lack an object we may more appropriately speak of the interior realization of virtue, of ignorance or of wonder (*thauma*). In any case, since questing after virtue repeatedly ends in *aporia*, impasse, teaching virtue becomes contradictory for it is not unlike teaching the unteachable.<sup>33</sup> Despite that virtue is ultimately not teachable paradoxically in the *Meno* teaching virtue becomes a kind of “reminding” (98b7-c1).

The idea of teaching as ‘reminding’ in the *Meno* (a transitional dialogue<sup>34</sup>) seems very interesting but probably it is not purely a Socratic teaching, rather a Platonic metaphysical invention put in the mouth of

<sup>30</sup> Cf. V. A. Shukov (2003), “An Apology for Socrates’ Freethinking,” *Russian Studies in Philosophy* 42 (1, 2003): 48-65.

<sup>31</sup> The elucidation that follows clarifies the argument outside the rubric of the dialogue. But for further clarifications regarding the arguments involved see R. S. Bluck, “Plato’s *Meno*,” *Phronesis* 6 (1, 1961): 94-101; P. Dimas, “True Belief in the *Meno*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 14 (1996): 1-32; W. J. Prior, *An Introduction to Ancient Greek Ethics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991); T. Irwin, *Plato’s Ethics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1995); H. Zyskind and R. Sternfeld, “Plato’s *Meno* 89c: ‘Virtue is Knowledge’ A Hypothesis?,” *Phronesis* 21 (2, 1976), 130-34; R. Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave: Moral Inquiry in Plato’s *Meno** (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Green, “The Morality of Wonder.”

<sup>33</sup> Perhaps this is exactly what Socrates’ paradox “virtue is knowledge” and more generally his paradoxical philosophy essentially does: ‘teach the unteachable,’ ‘think the unthinkable,’ ‘speak the unspeakable.’

<sup>34</sup> Cf. G. Vlastos, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 45-80. Vlastos’ chronology places the *Meno* in the ‘Transitional Dialogues’ which bear a later order of composition than the ‘*Elenctic* Dialogues’ that precede them. Both *elenctic* and transitional dialogues belong to the ‘Early Dialogues’ as

Socrates. Nevertheless, if we strip it from its ties to the Platonic doctrines of recollection or *anamnesis*, we are left with a new and wonderful invigorating pedagogical reality: the teacher reminds, or remembers reminding, or is reminded to remind, or else remembers to remind, perhaps lets others remember; mostly, the inspiring example of the teacher reminds, or his silences remind. At any rate the teacher constantly learns reminding and of most importance is the teacher's inspiring example. He must allow the student to learn 'reminding.'

The teacher's resourcefully inaugurates the ever shifting pedagogical context to host 'remembering' (or reminding) the ignorance from which virtue ensues. In turn, the student's duty is to attune and accustom herself to the teacher's example and to his silences. The teacher's state of truth 'wise ignorance' accompanies assists the student, and after much assistance and accustoming the *educandus* progressively learns 'reminding.' That is the student now without the teacher's assistance 'remembers reminding,' hence unceasingly 're-minds' self/others. Remembrance in this sense progressively accustoms one to the interior realization of non-cognitive truth, ignorance-itself.

In his *Seventh Epistole*, Plato strongly criticizes the written word and finally, agreeing with his teacher who wrote nothing, opts for the oral tradition favoring dialogue intercourse and direct encounter. Words, Plato tells us are not effective philosophical means (*Epistole Z 344*) real education happens through long personal contact and interaction between *educator* and *educandus* (340-345). He writes:

I certainly have composed no work in regard to it, nor shall I ever do so in the future, for there is no way of putting this knowledge in words like other sciences (*mathemata*); but after long continued intercourse [study] between teacher and student, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled [like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark], it is generated in the soul and straightaway becomes self-sustaining [nourishes-itself].<sup>35</sup>

Now returning to the claim 'virtue is knowledge,' it seems both Plato and Socrates are convinced that only divine relation can resolve the paradox. Of course, it is beyond the present scope to address questions of the 'the unity of the virtues'<sup>36</sup> or of *akrasia*<sup>37</sup> (weakness of will) in the *Protagoras* or elsewhere. I will limit myself to what Devereux writes regarding the absence of *akrasia* in Socrates. For his strength of mind, he tells us, "there is no need to tame unruly passions—knowledge of the good ensures that one will have the right aims and intentions, and will act accordingly."<sup>38</sup> Of course, in the final reckoning Socrates' divine relation or inspiration (his *daimonion*) silences *akrasia*.

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opposed to the 'Middle' or 'Late' ones. According to Vlastos' view the earlier dialogues are closer to the philosophical perspectives of the historical Socrates than are the middle and more so the late ones. Hence, the *elenctic* dialogues are closer to the historical Socrates than the transitional ones. The *Apology* though not a dialogue seems to be one of the first of Plato's compositions; Socratic scholarship generally agrees that it presents the closest representation of the historical Socrates. Incidentally, the *Protagoras* belongs to the earlier dialogues. However, according to Burnyeat ("The Impiety of Socrates") questions regarding the historical Socrates constitute "a paradise of inconclusive guesswork" (1). Another interesting take on the question of the historical Socrates is presented by C. Kahn, "Did Socrates Write Socratic Dialogues?," *Classical Quarterly* 31 (2, 1981): 305-20 and *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 48-65. For a critical account of Vlastos' chronology of the dialogues see H. H. Benson, *Socratic Wisdom* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000). In any case, all subsequent perspectives address the original insight of Gregory Vlastos whose authority on the matter cannot be overlooked.

<sup>35</sup> Plato, *Epistole Z 341c-d*; brackets indicate alternative translations. Translation by G. R. Morrow "Letters," in J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson eds., *Plato, Complete Works*, 1634-76.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. T. Penner, "The Unity of Virtue," *Philosophical Review* 82 (1, 1973): 35-68; G. Vlastos, "The Unity of the Virtues in the *Protagoras*," *The Review of Metaphysics* 25 (3, 1972): 415-458.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. G. X. Santas, "Plato's *Protagoras* and Explanations of Weakness," in G. Vlastos ed., *The Philosophy of Socrates: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York: Doubleday, 1971).

<sup>38</sup> D. T. Devereux, "The Unity of the Virtues in Plato's *Protagoras* and *Laches*," *The Philosophical Review* 101 (4, 1992): 765-89, 765.



Be as it may, Socrates in the *Apology* openly declares his deficiency in moral knowledge claims not to be a teacher of virtue that virtue cannot be taught, and his disavowal of knowledge becomes an avowal of ignorance of the highest things (*ta megista* – 22d7). After all, how can he be a teacher of virtue when he claims to know ‘little or nothing?’ But despite this, Plato praises Socrates not only for being a good man but the best of men: “the most just man then living” (*Epistole* Z 324b-e). In fact, the *Apology* is a most dramatic portrayal of his teacher’s formidable virtue amazing integrity of character and unparalleled dignity in defending truth. Once more, in the *Symposium* Plato has Alcibiades praise Socrates’ unusual qualities; Alcibiades tells us that Socrates is “truly worthy of a god, bursting with figures of virtue inside” (222a3-4). Moreover, for the oracle Pythia he is the “wisest of men;”<sup>39</sup> and through the generations he has indeed become “humanity’s timeless companion.”<sup>40</sup> His towering example perennially amazes. And precisely it is his awe inspiring example his stature and grandeur that grounds his profession of ignorance.

The sage of antiquity, as it were, carrying the burden of an examined philosophy overcomes customary standards and rational norms in favor of *theia mania* (divine inspiration), only to perennially challenge posterity as Shestov puts it, with the “weight of ultimate ignorance,” and wherever knowledgeable ignorance flourishes life is possibly death and death the “miracle of awakening” to justice.<sup>41</sup> Ultimately, *eros* in the Socratic sense transcends the economy of life and death pointing the way to the highest wisdom and philosophic *ethos*, transforming us into better educated citizens, more aware of moral social and political realities.

Socratic philosophical *spoude* and *paideia* emphasizes the progressive attainment to knowledge of ignorance of the good and noble, of all that is lofty holy and divine. It stages resourcefully the pedagogical scene to generate in teacher and student those spiritual forces responsible for engaging ultimate moral value. Most importantly, it inspires virtue and enhances moral acumen, teaching that ever-rising *eros* and *arête* are born spiritually interiorly in the human *psyche*—the soul or moral self.<sup>42</sup> Knowledge is the ontological power that generates *arête* interiorly, creatively. Indeed, Socratic knowledge and virtue bear coincidence against the backdrop of the deity. In unknowing, the deity grants genuine knowledge (*eros*) granting the ontological power that bestows *ethos* and *arête*. Association with the unknowable deity issues forth philosophical *paideia*.

Socrates’ negative manifestation of deity establishes the order of knowledge that is virtue, and as previously mentioned this order has nothing to do with erudition or rational scientific technological knowledge. Undoubtedly, Socrates would repudiate the modern tendency to view knowledge as repertoire of strategies, skills and competencies at the beck and call of societal needs technological innovation and market dynamics: where fact subverts *ethos* for the sake of profit. Instead, genuine knowledge rekindles learning for the common good in fidelity to context and circumstance. Plato seems to find Socrates’ lifelong learning is “kindled by a leaping spark that straightaway nourishes itself” (*Epistole* VII, 341c-d), purifying knowledge to outweigh “a thousand eyes” (*Republic* VII, 527d-e).

<sup>39</sup> V. L. Kurabtsev, “The Wisest of Men,” *Russian Studies in Philosophy* 44 (4, 2006), 75-91, 78.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. F. Kh. Kessidi, “Humanity’s Timeless Companion,” *Russian Studies in Philosophy* 42 (1, 2003): 30-47, 30.

<sup>41</sup> L. Shestov, *Na vesakh Iova* (Paris: Annales Contemporaines, 1975), 152. Cf. V. L. Kurabtsev, “The Wisest of Men,” 79.

<sup>42</sup> For the Socratic conception of soul as distinguished from that of Plato’s see J. Beckman, *The Religious Dimension of Socrates’ Thought* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1979), 18-32. Regarding Socrates’ meaning of soul Beckman says: “*psyche* was taken to be equivalent to the person, the subject of moral activity, indeed, *the subject of all the ordinary experience of life*. And this person was no embodied soul or mind: it was the whole concrete, fleshly, ‘worldly man.’” And again, “the Socratic conception of the person, and derivatively of the *psyche*, implied a necessary relationship to the body and bodily conditions of being—though in the last analysis [...] the Socratic usage [of *psyche*] was philosophically unanalyzed [...], particularly with its status after death” (20; brackets and emphasis added). Speaking of Socrates’ accomplishment, Beckman says: “the Good had come to exert a permanent, habitual hold on his *psyche*. Socrates had died to his own self-interests—even his instinct for self-preservation yielded to the claim of *arête*. [...] He had transcended the self and become possessed by love for divine *arête*” (180). Once more: “[...] his will had become permanently, habitually oriented to divine *arête* [...] he suffered the vision of divine *arête* as a divine erotic *pathos*, and not simply as a momentary, fleeting act of seeing, but as a permanent condition of life” (ibid.).

### What Might Socrates Think of the Eclipse of Virtue in Modern Education?

Socrates might repudiate the modern tendency to found a philosophy of education based solely upon epistemological or gnoseological criteria, maintaining that without a breakthrough to the boundless ‘spiritual point’ afforded by philosophical truth and justice—the disclosure of ignorance as such—, lifelong learning becomes an outdated ideal of knowledge accumulation and *hubris* not praxis of renewal and transformation. Most probably he will be quick to point out that the economy of modern education mostly subverts dynamic pedagogical encounter or sustained personal interaction, in favor of teaching methodologies that fail to bring unqualified transformation to the concrete educational context. Hence, he might think education today effectually annuls philosophical questioning nullifying the ontological power of *aporia*. It marginalizes the real teacher, the truly continuous learner who realizes her deficiency in moral matters; the genuine teacher is effectually superseded by today’s academic novelty, ‘the research man.’

Further, he might severely challenge the atrophy of teaching and learning, pointing to the lamentable fact of mass education institutionalized, driven by the nihilistic onset of rigorous research methodologies at the service of scientific projects, economic resources and societal practical and political demands extraneous to the educational process. He might criticize the way overspecialization follows the modern dominance of theory fragmenting the unity of all knowledge thereby undermines compromises modern education, opening the division of knowledge with disciplined foci to the economy of technologized science and standardized research looking for quick and efficient results. He might outrightly question present day epistemic research and teaching methodologies, whose eagerness for disseminating objectified determinable results gives way to the technical organization of thinking, driving modern education to devote itself to the production and consumption of knowledge in the service of utility, technicality, vocational training and the general needs of society and profession, conforming thus to the currents of market dynamics, culturally conditioned pedagogical trends, national and international needs or other extraneous forces.

Probably, he would consistently debunk the utilitarian optimization and efficiency of the practical application of various knowledges, and the negative repercussions of an unparalleled ungrounded-ness in the positing of evaluative methodologies of knowledge. He might find that most scientific research is incapable of questioning the metaphysical subjective and moral presuppositions of its positive advancements of knowledge. The sage of antiquity might think: ‘their research centres and sciences know many fine and good things: they sent rockets to outer space, are responsible for major breakthroughs in the investigation of mysterious matter, and for phenomenal advancements in medicine; whilst it is a marvel to behold the magnificent achievements of modern technology.’ But perhaps raising an eyebrow he might again think: ‘Despite all the great advancements of their civilization, why has most of modern education lost its central aim of teaching and learning what concerns the human ultimately?’ And again: ‘is it not contradictory to consider somebody educated when s/he bears no self-knowledge also bears severe deficiencies in character?’ Once more: ‘has modern education given up on the education of character?’

Indeed he might conclude that modern education has for the most part given up on matters of ultimate moral and spiritual value. It has become oblivious to and does not aim towards knowledge of the highest things (*ta megista* – *Ap.* 22d7).

MacKenzie says Socrates’ edge over others is “his understanding of what knowledge might be.”<sup>43</sup> If this is the case which I believe it may be, what then might Socrates think (or know) of the eclipse of virtue in modern education? It behooves me, I honestly do not know. However, it is likely he would find that modern education needs to be ethicised by philosophical *paideia*.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> M. MacKenzie, “The Virtues of Socratic Ignorance,” 331.

<sup>44</sup> This section forms one of my major theses in P. E. Michaelides, “Heidegger and Socrates: Teaching and Learning as a Lifelong Undertaking,” in V. Karavakou (ed.), *Lifelong Learning: Interdisciplinary Approaches* (Salonica, GR: University of Macedonia Publications, 2011), 135-49.

## In Place of Conclusion

More than ever today, civilization needs a moral and spiritual transformation. The crucial questions confronting modernity are neither economic political or military nor are they epistemological, ideological or even intellectual, rather they are grounded in ethics: the spiritual foundation for all spheres of human activity. The advancement of culture perhaps the very survival of humanity depends on our capacity to respond ethically from a spiritual point of view. The *apotreptic* monitions of the Socratic *daimonion* suggest that human destiny is shaped by our personal response to otherness grounded in ethics *par excellence*, ethics as *prima philosophia* in irrevocable relation to the divine. Divine relation enhances philosophical questioning and enriches the human potential for dialogue, heightening the primacy of the ethical imperative posed by otherness, edifying and transforming both self and other<sup>45</sup>.

Socratic pre-technological *paideia* enables ethical knowledge actualizing the development and moral transformation of character for the sake of the *polis*, the education of its citizens, and for humanity at large. The Socratic teacher already moral and philosophic exemplar bears the spiritual activity of constant learning/unlearning, transforming the everyday for the benefit of others in fidelity to context and circumstance. S/he is paradigmatic in accepting the just and fully human for the sake of the community. On the other hand, modern education is found lacking seems incapable of creatively instituting or inaugurating the spirit of striving towards the highest understanding of *kalon k'agathon*, to yet a deeper realization of ignorance a new advent of its divine truth.

Education today falls prey to “the looming threat of nihilism that plaques our era,” and to the “devaluation of ethics its deterioration to the relativism of subjectivity.”<sup>46</sup> In effect, it stands incapable of questing after what it does not know, thus favours the positive advancements of objectively justifiable epistemic truth and knowledge; failing to bring moral transformation to the educational context. On the other hand, Socratic philosophical *paideia* ardently espouses an education whose aim bears the attainment of moral knowledge, favouring the disavowal of positive knowledge (either objective or subjective); for, in the absence of knowledge the redemptive power of *arête* and realized ignorance is made manifest. Hence, Socrates’ *spoude* of ignorance bestows upon the human renewal and transformation unto its highest humanity. Whilst his timeless way of life brings to light one of the most pertinent and neglected aspects of modern education, the spiritual and moral dimension through which personal transformation and self-knowledge are made possible. The eclipse of moral knowledge as the primary aim of education today makes Socrates’ insights all the more vital.

For the sage of antiquity divine ignorance and unknowing enables and enhances inspiration, bringing into the pedagogical context *aporia*, *eros*, *thaumasmos*, *enthusiasmos*: creativity, resourcefulness, and contemplative silence. Surely, the negativity arising from the realization of ignorance is at first deflating as it initiates the negative existential state of *aporia*, impasse, or lack of resource that throws the whole person into uncertainty, confusion, doubt, exasperation, despair, anxiety, resentment, and puzzlement. But most positively it purges the conceit of holding onto contradictory beliefs and false knowledge. *Aporia* induces shame and *apotropē* toward one’s old stance, at best generating change in orientation directed toward the ethical life but concurrently, and ultimately, whether one is aware of it or not, it initiates a change in life-posture comported toward *aporia par excellence* the ever unsolvable *aporia* of what the wisdom of the god might be. The examined life is indispensable to achieve human wisdom (wise ignorance); it transforms the *aporetic state* into philosophic wonder where one, along the pathways of Socrates, forever on the lookout, questioningly, maintains a keen awareness of the distinction between human and divine wisdom thereby, at every juncture, establishes a proper relation to the deity.

<sup>45</sup> Michaelides, “Ethics *qua* the Divine,” 1.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

Socrates' insight into ignorance makes him neither wise about wisdom (*sophos ten sophian*) nor ignorant about ignorance (*amathes ten amathian* – 23e). The sage of antiquity wants us to become witnesses of our truth living examples of our philosophy, not to follow his philosophy. But there is an unwritten stipulation that one's philosophy become as it where a moral light that actualizes human integrity in spite of deficiency in ethical matters. The virtuous human, aware of deficiency in excellence and human integrity continuously strives through singular efforts in philosophy to perfect the ultimate *desiradum*: the education of character.

Hegel distinguishes Socrates as first philosopher who established in the history of western culture the singularity of the individual, transforming thus a hitherto externally conceived god into the inward voice of genius (*daimonion*). He singularly recovered the full blown interiority of human particularity carrying out as Hegel puts it, the command of the “God of knowledge” to give new meaning to the utterance “Know Thyself” which “Pythia herself pronounced.” And again, “Socrates is the hero who established [...] that man must look within himself to know what is Truth.” He initiated “a complete revolution in the Greek mind [...] the personal self-consciousness of every thinking man has come into play.”<sup>47</sup> With the exception, that Socrates' understanding of truth is grounded in *theia mania*, the divine inspiration of wise ignorance that first discloses the opening of truth *alētheia*, *dikaio*, *arête*, *paideia*, and *sophia*.<sup>48</sup> Ultimately, Socratic philosophical *paideia* accentuates the interplay of knowledge and ignorance to unravel divine inspiration, facilitating thus the spiritual philosophical and social political processes that empower lifelong teaching as learning.

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<sup>47</sup> G. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, E. S. Haldane trans., (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 435.

<sup>48</sup> Socrates' conception of truth does not pronounce the birth of singular self-consciousness or ‘free subjectivity’ as ‘world historical event’ the way Hegel perceives it. It appears that Socrates' relation to the divine is trans-subjective and inter-subjective not a matter of free subjectivity or world historical event. Cf. Michaelides, “Heidegger and Socrates,” 136-37.