

## EPILOGUE

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# Socratic Rules of Engagement

THIS book has discussed the Socratic method as a set of tools that can be used to aid understanding and wisdom. The book has also discussed a Socratic *ethic* that treats those tools as practical ways of giving effect to larger principles. This epilogue talks about how Socratic principles can be used in arguments and conversations that don't amount to dialogues in the classic sense. A flexible use of those principles can, for example, produce healthier political discourse, a theme noted in the preface and touched on from time to time as the book went along. For the most part I've preferred to keep this discussion separate, because Socrates has ideas to offer that are larger than politics. But his teachings are perfectly relevant to how we think and talk about that subject, as they are to how we think and talk about anything else that is important. The ideas shown below can have use in every sort of contentious conversation.

*Rules of engagement.* Suppose, then, that you do want to adapt Socratic principles to settings that don't lend themselves to Socratic dialogue as such. It is then useful to think of Socrates as providing not just rules for dialogue but more general rules of engagement. His teachings can be converted into any number of such practical dos and don'ts. The organization of them under a certain number of headings will always be a little arbitrary, but for convenience I would offer these twelve:

1. *The open table.* Everything is open for inquiry; no view is immune from questioning if someone wants to offer it.
2. *The purpose of inquiry.* The purpose of inquiry is to reach the truth or get closer to it. The purpose is not to say or prove whatever will advance a goal in the background, or to make the partners to the inquiry feel good, or to win an argument.
3. *Challenges wanted.* Questioning is the natural and welcome

response to any position one might take. Attempts at refutation are the acts of a friend and are presumptively offered and received in that spirit, even if—especially if—the challenge is made to a strongly held view. You might be wrong, or (if not) there might still be a little something right in what your challenger says. Being shown that you’ve erred or been imprecise is a favor. Comfort in confessing error is a sign of health.

4. *Arguments met with arguments.* The Socratic approach doesn’t say that certain arguments don’t deserve a reply because they’re contemptible and shouldn’t have been made in the first place. If someone thinks something is so and is wrong, the appropriate response is to explain why it isn’t so.

5. *The priority of reason.* Arguments are judged on their merits—that is, on the quality of the evidence or reasoning that supports them, not on the identities of their makers. Claims that anyone’s perspective is entitled to deference (or skepticism) are themselves judged on evidence and reasons—for example, reasons to believe that one person has access to evidence or experience that others don’t, and that the answer to a question depends on it.

6. *Elenctic reasoning.* Inquiry is made, wherever possible, by finding common ground of agreement from which to begin. Then each side does the favor of trying to help the other see inconsistencies between that point of agreement and their position on whatever else is under discussion. Consistency is treated as an important test of a set of claims.

7. *Self-skepticism.* One’s own partisanship is distrusted. “Partisanship,” for these purposes, means a strongly felt commitment to a certain set of beliefs that makes one want and expect inquiry to come out a certain way, and that makes people who challenge those beliefs seem to be enemies. It’s easy to bend reasoning and find it convincing when it leads to results that you like, and it’s hard to see this happening when you’re the one who is doing it. Everyone stays conscious of this risk, and it’s another reason why contradiction is welcome.

8. *Group skepticism.* Popular opinion and easy consensus are likewise distrusted. A room full of people who all agree about something

regarded as controversial outside the room, and especially a group feeling congratulatory about its agreement, is uncomfortable. It is too much like the Athenian jury with its hemlock. A group needs a gadfly.

9. *Manners*. Inquiry is expected to be rigorous, fierce, possibly relentless, but always courteous. Sarcasm and other forms of irony are principally directed at oneself and otherwise reserved for people who claim to have all the answers. There is no name-calling or denunciation. Nobody is shouted down. If someone insists on being wrong, their punishment is being wrong and perhaps having this understood by others. All parties observe the principle of charity in interpreting what others say, and prefer to take on objections in their strongest rather than their weakest form.

10. *Candor*. Partners in inquiry say what they really think. They are not punished for it. Saying something unpopular is, to the contrary, considered admirable; even if it's wrong, it is a service to the cause of getting closer to the truth. If someone is willing to incur a personal cost to put forward a perspective, that perspective is probably shared by others who do not want to bear the cost. It needs to be said so that it can be tested and determined to be true or false.

11. *Offense*. Everyone tries to make claims in ways that do not give personal offense to their partners. Everyone tries to receive claims in ways that do not take offense from their partners. The giving or taking of offense is understood to be a serious threat to the process of getting anywhere in inquiry.

12. *Humility*. Conclusions are provisional. They may seem very probable, so much so that they are well worth fighting for. But there is always a reserve of doubt, an awareness of one's own ignorance and blind spots, and a recollection that others have been equally sure and have been wrong, over and over again. The result of all this is an attitude of humility at all times about how much you know and how sure you should be about it.

These rules are all derived from earlier chapters in the book. If they aren't persuasive, the book isn't persuasive, and at this late date I can only apologize. Or the rules might, to the contrary, seem so obviously sound as not to require endorsement or even naming.

Unfortunately they need both. I don't suggest that they should be immune from challenge, of course. Such immunity would be contrary to their terms, and anyway they stand up to challenge quite well when the challenge is direct and reasoned. But they also can be blown aside by other forces. Some of those forces are famous competitors such as demagoguery, outrage, and the smear. Others are more insidious: orthodoxy, ostracism, and the snub. These are old stories. Just ask Socrates. There is no Socratic age for which nostalgia is in order; the Socratic ethic has never been the dominant force in the world, or in the academy, just as and just because it is never the dominant force in the psyche. It's always the resistance. So these rules are often challenging to observe, but they are worthy aspirations for the Socratically inclined.

That reference to resistance raises natural questions about how to deal with people who *don't* subscribe to those rules of engagement. The presumptive and simple answer is that you use the Socratic approach to decide whether to use the Socratic approach. To put it more concretely, you can ask (and ask again) what purpose you're trying to accomplish and whether Socratic rules of engagement are suited for it. I regard those rules as the right ones, for example, in most conversations about legal issues, whether or not those on the other side are playing by all those rules themselves (often enough they aren't). But then suppose two lawyers are arguing in court. Now some of the Socratic rules are a bad fit because the lawyers aren't trying to find the truth directly; they're each arguing one side of the case so that someone *else* can find the truth—a judge or jury. Socrates offers a particular goal (seeking the truth for oneself) pursued by particular means (his method). Litigation is simply a different game. It has aims and rules that overlap with the Socratic ones only in part.

That example is particular to law, but the principle is general. The Socratic rules are well suited for some ends but not others. They probably aren't the right rules if you're arguing with a child, or trying to get a hostile audience to calm down, or being beaten with a pipe. But let's take an intermediate case: a family gathering where you're seated next to an uncle who has political views that seem crazy, and

who doesn't play by Socratic rules. I can only offer friendly advice (he's *your* uncle), but a Socratic approach might be just the thing for that occasion. The gentle use of the elenchus described in Chapter 18 involves finding some common ground and, from there, asking good-natured questions about how that point of agreement relates to your points of disagreement. This may or may not help you or him toward persuasion or a better understanding of whatever might be the issue. Still, though, isn't a broadly Socratic approach more likely to have those good effects than other possibilities—even if those rules aren't followed by your crazy uncle? How is breaking them yourself going to help?

But of course the real question is what you want out of this conversation. What is the purpose of it? Perhaps you are better off changing the subject or deferring the discussion to a time when your uncle is not arguing in front of an audience, or has had fewer drinks, or otherwise is more likely to be reasonable. And the same roughly goes for friends, or co-workers, or people you encounter online. You can only control what you do, not what they do. So you have decisions to make about your ends and your means. Socrates has suggestions about both. They are great when everyone else will buy into them. They are often great even when everyone else won't—but not necessarily. You have to think clearly about your goals and how you are trying to reach them. The general point: whether Socratic testing is suitable is a topic suitable for Socratic testing.

*Socratic schooling.* The worldly conditions for Socratic discourse aren't always the same. I made reference above to some competitors to Socratic rules of engagement: demagoguery, fury, ostracism, etc. Those competitors, too, grow better in some conditions than others. In our times, advances in technology have made conditions unusually severe for the Socratic approach and favorable for its rivals. The advances allow those competing forces to be set loose on a large scale by anyone with a computer, or indeed a smartphone. Socratic habits require patience to develop and use. They don't benefit in the same way from technologies that encourage quick reactions in short bursts.

The result has been a cultural shift away from the values that are the subject of this book; the rules of engagement for discourse online are often the opposite of the Socratic ones on every count. True, things said online get tested, or in any event get attacked. But little about this is Socratic, and the bad persistently drives out the good. Social media in particular amounts to a campus on which atrocious habits of discourse are taught by the pervasive method. The consequences for our political and cultural life have been sad and sometimes calamitous. Nobody doubts this. People only disagree about examples, usually because they don't mind irrationality—they barely recognize it—when it cuts the way they like politically. So some think *this* is an example of the calamity and some say *that* is an example of it. My view is that they are all correct.

These problems cannot be solved. They are embedded in human nature; social media is merely an accelerant, though a powerful one. As suggested earlier, the best we can hope for is a committed resistance. And the most natural and valuable setting for that resistance is the classroom. Different games have different rules, as we've seen, and are suited for different occasions. But if there is one place where Socratic aims and rules of engagement ought to be expected, it's the university. Universities exist in the first instance to advance knowledge of the truth and to teach students to seek it. The classroom in particular—in a university or elsewhere—is a small, temporary, and controlled community in which standards of discourse can be set deliberately. If students don't learn Socratic habits there, they can't be expected to pick them up in worse conditions when they're older and involved in public life. So if you (the Socratic type) see a political discussion spoiled by someone who views Socratic rules of engagement as unimportant, or as outmoded, or as a joke, it is reasonable to think: here is someone our schools let down.

In which classrooms does the Socratic ethic matter? In all of them, whether or not a class is taught Socratically in any strict sense. For whatever else any course claims to teach, it always teaches lessons about standards of discourse, humility or arrogance, and other variables that can be Socratic or not. At a time when the Socratic ethic

is in such cultural distress, those lessons need to be taught by their friends deliberately and well. This is more than a matter of technique. It is a project for the heart. Think back to Mill's comment in chapter 3 about how deeply affected he was by the *Gorgias*—not by its precise arguments, but by the commitment that it conveys. In his notes on that dialogue, Mill put it this way: “the love of virtue, and every other noble feeling, is not communicated by reasoning, but caught by inspiration or sympathy from those who already have it.”<sup>1</sup> What most affected Mill, in other words, is what most affects any student: time spent with someone who cares enough about an idea to make the feeling infectious.

That is what a teacher of the Socratic school needs to cultivate: knowledge and skill, by all means, but also a Socratic intensity of feeling. You have to care feverishly yourself if you mean to inspire your students to care half that much. This becomes the subtext of every lesson taught, whatever the stated topic might be and whether or not it lends itself to questioning. Let the Socratic rules of engagement be felt as important. Let students see how the hemlock is administered in our times and regard it with contempt and disgust. Let them speak fearlessly and receive refutation the same way; let them listen fearlessly and without offense; let them prefer truth to all else. Let them see, above all, what it is for Socratic values to be not only understood and practiced but also loved.

And if you are Socratically inclined but *not* in the teaching business? Then you might do all those things just the same; for the players in the classroom all have analogues in the self. We are each of us professor and student, just as we all have an internalized Socrates, a Callicles, and an Athenian jury. And the interior versions of all those figures are more consequential in the end. Paid teachers deliver a small measure of our schooling compared to the schooling of ourselves that we carry out well or badly. In the self as in the classroom, the healthiest ethic is a Socratic one.

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1. Robson, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, 11:150.