

- (1) a term used ambiguously (Which term? Distinguish its two meanings. Show how it has changed its meaning in the course of your opponent's argument.); or
- (2) a false premise (Which premise? Is it stated or implied? If implied, prove that it is *necessarily* implied. Whether stated or implied, show that it is false; give reasons for disagreeing with it.); or
- (3) a logical fallacy. (Which fallacy? Use the principles in this book to show that that the conclusion does not logically follow from the premises.)

7. **Anticipate and answer objections.** To be maximally complete and fair, add one more step:

- (a) imagine the strongest way your opponent would try to refute *your* arguments (that you gave in part 5) in one of the three ways above, and then
- (b) defend your argument against these criticisms.

## Section 2. How to write a Socratic dialogue

I have written and published half a dozen full-length books of Socratic dialogues, and judging by reader reactions, they are the most successful and appreciated of my 40-odd published books. So I want to spread the secret (which is no secret at all, as far as I can see).

Like most philosophy students, I loved reading Plato and found the dramatic form of dialogue much more engaging than the monologue. A monologue is more likely to commit the one unforgivable sin of any writer, boredom, because it has only one voice, it is impersonal, and it usually lacks drama. I wondered why so few other philosophers copied Plato's dialogue form, and why even when they did, the dialogues were not really Socratic. I still don't know. (Augustine's *On the Teacher* and Berkeley's *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* are the only two lasting philosophical classics I know in dialogue form, unless you count Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy* as a dialogue too).

No one knows how close Plato's Socrates is to the actual historical Socrates, but Plato surely included *some* invented fiction, however closely based on Socrates' historical character; so I could think of no reason why we today could not extend the historical figure of Socrates through our own imagination. I asked many people why we couldn't, but no one gave me an answer. So I tried a simple experiment, with my students as the guinea pigs.

I always introduce students to philosophy first through Socrates, and I encourage original essays, so I suggested that the students write their essays by imitating Plato's form and writing Socratic dialogues. Many tried it, and almost all succeeded, both by their own estimation and by mine. If students can do it, why can't teachers? I couldn't imagine why. So to find out why it can't be done,

I did it. And the answer is simply that there is *no* reason why it can't be done. Furthermore, I think I can even give at least a few pieces of pretty obvious and commonsensical advice to others now about how to do it. Here they are:

A. Points of personal advice to the writer:

1. As with most enterprises, the first and necessary step is: "Begin!" "Just do it." "Try." For "well begun is half done" (ancient Greek proverb) and "whatever is worth doing, is worth doing badly" (G.K. Chesterton).
2. Don't be afraid to imitate. Apprenticeship by imitation was the primary method of teaching almost anything (and it worked!) until the modern cult of individuality and originality. You can never be as creative or original by trying to be original as you can by forgetting all about originality and just "doing your thing."

And if anyone is imitable (and worth imitating), it's Socrates.

3. So immerse yourself in Socrates. Read all Plato's earlier dialogues, up to *Republic*, Book I. (After that, the personality of Socrates recedes and Plato the professor emerges. He may be an excellent professor, and a great philosopher, and his system may be a valid extension of Socrates' beginnings, but he's just not Socrates, as St. Paul may be a profoundly wise and great Christian but he's just not Jesus.)
4. Instinctive and inward imitation is better than contrived and external imitation. Let the *spirit* of Socrates get under your skin, so that you can use your imagination and ask yourself: What would the real, historical Socrates have said here? Socrates' method is only partially technical and able to be formulated objectively and impersonally. Learn both parts, but don't neglect the inner spirit.
5. There are two ways to write a Socratic dialogue: (a) You can simply use your imagination, be Socrates and his dialogue partner (let us call him "O" for "other"), and let the argument and the two personalities carry you wherever they naturally go, like a river. (b) Or you can make a logical map of the argument before you begin, and add the dramatic and personal dimension to it as you write. If (b) proves too un-Socratic and artificial, try (a). If (a) proves to be too unstructured, use (b) at least for a while. After some practice with (b) you may be able to transition to (a).
6. Whether you use (a) or (b) above, you must know logic, naturally and instinctively. Don't think you can master this section without mastering the rest of this book.
7. In the process of arguing, use the rules for Socratic debate on pages 347-50.

B. Points of advice in constructing the dramatic character of Socrates:

1. Confine yourself to only two characters, Socrates and "O." Perhaps later you can

add other characters, as Plato does; but even then, each should take his turn: do not put three or more people into the conversation *at once* (except perhaps very briefly). If you do, that will loosen its logical structure, and *argument* will become *conversation*.

2. The initial question should arise naturally from an ordinary situation or conversation. It should not be artificial or imposed, but arise from "O's" interests.
3. Like Plato, you might want to add the little trick of placing a veiled clue to the central point of the dialogue in the very first line.
4. Socrates asks the questions rather than giving the answers (except, perhaps, in response to his dialogue partner's questions). Remember, Socrates is not a preacher. (This is easy to understand, but surprisingly hard to obey.)
5. There is always an ironic contrast between Socrates' knowing that he doesn't know and "O's" not knowing that he doesn't know. The one who seems to know, doesn't; and the one who seems not to know, does. The one who seems to be the student (Socrates) is really the teacher, and vice versa.
6. This irony may emerge in the interaction between the characters if "O" is a bit arrogant – in which case Socrates gets a chance to use his (always light and subtle) wit and humor. But "O" should never be unfairly treated, put down, or preached at; and neither should the reader.
7. The personal, psychological struggle is as much a part of the Socratic dialogue as the struggle of ideas; and a Socratic dialogue is a form of spiritual warfare, therapy, or doctoring to the spirit of the student. Yet paradoxically, it is for this reason that you must avoid direct personal confrontation and let the *argument* always be the object of attention. Socrates sees himself and "O" not as a winner and a loser but as two scientists mutually seeking the truth by testing two alternative hypotheses. Whichever one finds the truth, both are winners.
8. Socrates' goal is always ultimately somehow moral (though this is not always apparent at first). For he has only one lifetime, and it is too precious to waste on issues that are not somehow connected to the most important purpose of human life, becoming more wise and virtuous.
9. Socrates' aim is not to harm but to help "O". Sometimes, this involves shame, but it never involves a conflict of interests – at least not from Socrates' point of view. "O" may or may not understand this, but Socrates, like Jesus, is altruistic in his very offensiveness. He believes, as Aquinas says, that "there is no greater act of charity one can do to his neighbor than to lead him to the truth." Socratic dialogue is ultimately missionary work.

#### C. Points of advice about the logical method

1. The question must be defined early on.

2. The question should be formulated disjunctively, so that it has only two possible answers. Otherwise, an infinite number of arguments, and of dialogues, will be necessary. In the *Republic*, e.g., the question "What is justice?" quickly becomes "Is justice the interest of the stronger?" and "Is justice more profitable than injustice?"
3. Potentially ambiguous terms must be defined by mutual agreement.
4. Like a psychoanalyst, Socrates does not give his opinion unless it is demanded, but asks "O" what *he* believes.
5. Once he gets an answer from "O," Socrates may now use one or more of the following strategies:
  - (a) Ask "O" *why* he believes this, and examine "O's" argument, looking for an ambiguous term, a false premise, or a logical fallacy; or
  - (b) Trace "O's" premises back to further premises, either by *showing* what missing premises "O's" enthymemes must presuppose or else *asking* "O" to prove his premises, and then examining that proof; or
  - (c) Draw out the consequences of "O's" belief, in a (usually multi-step) *reductio ad absurdum*, or
  - (d) Construct an argument whose conclusion will be the contradictory of "O's" belief. If Socrates does this, his argument should begin well "upstream" from the falls where "O" will come to grief. It should usually be a long, linear epicheirema, whose first premise "O" will agree to, like a man who puts his boat into a calm, inviting river upstream, and then finds that the river takes him downstream to rapids and waterfalls – and sinking. However, sometimes this argument is short, often an argument by analogy.
6. After the "sinking" the dialogue can end, or begin again with another attempt.
7. Socrates rarely uses cumulative arguments for the same conclusion, preferring one very sure and carefully worked out argument rather than a larger number of weaker arguments that need reinforcements. When he does use a number of cumulative arguments (e.g. in the *Phaedo* to prove the immortality of the soul) they are usually surprisingly unconvincing. (Contrast *Republic* X's more convincing single argument for immortality.)
8. See pages 274 and 308–9 on the use of hypothetical reasoning.
9. The dialogue ends either with closure and proof (as in the *Republic*) or not (as in the *Meno*). If with closure, "O" may accept this (as in the *Republic*) or not (as in the *Gorgias*). If the dialogue does not end with closure, a better answer may be suggested (as in the *Meno*) or it may not (as in the *Euthyphro*).
10. If Socrates interacts with modern people, remember that he is not a typically modern person – in his personality, in his assumptions, in his style of speech, or in his unlimited patience.