# Plato and the Socratic Method

The Socratic Method is generally thought of as a series of questions which lead to an answer or answers that are in some way, truthful. This definition, while technically correct, does not encompass the full extent of the Socratic Method. To fully appreciate the method, it is necessary to analyze several of the Platonic dialogues to understand how Plato's use of dialectic developed over time.

A number of the early dialogues deal with a single concept, such as temperance, friendship, courage or virtue. As the participants learn, defining these concepts is difficult, especially since Socrates insists that they attempt to come to "an understanding about the thing itself in terms of a definition, and not merely about the name minus the definition" (Plato, 552). In a number of the early dialogues, Socrates' insistence on coming to terms with the essence of the thing, and not just the commonly accepted definition, leads to the dialogue ending with no definition being developed. This lack of a final resolution is frustrating to many readers, and leads people to believe that something must be wrong with the commonly accepted notion of the Socratic Method. After all, isn't the end result of the Socratic Method the development of an acceptable definition; and if so, these early dialogues are somehow incomplete or lacking.

The view that the early dialogues are failures is based on the notion that the Socratic Method always produces clear-cut answers; this view also underestimates the difficulty of defining a word. Despite the difficulties inherent in defining the "thing in itself," Socrates relentlessly pursues his quest for meaning. In the "Charmides," for example, he rejects the idea that temperance is slow and steady, since temperance is a good, and good can sometimes be achieved by going slow or by going fast. Similarly, he rejects the notion that temperance is aimed at doing good actions, since a person cannot be sure beforehand whether his actions will yield good or evil results. He also rejects the notion that a person's knowledge is the same thing as a person knowing himself. In every case, he rejects the commonplace answers, and seeks the essence of the thing. That he and his confidants fail to find an answer is almost beside the point: the questioning is what matters to Plato (or Socrates). It is this persistence in asking questions that is the basis of the Socratic Method; if the questions produce answers, all the better. Some questions, as we hear Socrates relate to Lysis, have no answers: ". . . and as yet we have not been able to discover what is a friend" (Plato, 25).

In the "Laches," Socrates defines Plato's quandary: one of the aims of philosophy is to understand the virtuous life; yet in order to understand what constitutes a virtuous life, one must understand virtue. "Then must we not first know the nature of virtue? For how can we advise any one about the best mode of attaining something of which we are wholly ignorant" (Plato, 31). The participants in the conversation resolve to define a subset of virtue, courage, and proceed to offer a series of definitions which are each rejected by Socrates. By the end of the dialogue, Socrates admits defeat: "Then, Nicias, we have not discovered what courage is" (Plato, 37). Unable of defining a subset of virtue, they have no hope in these early dialogues to define the elusive idea of virtue.

In some respects, the frustration associated with the early dialogues is engendered by the use of a strict dialectic method: that is, the rigid specification that the questions and answers follow a structured format. These early dialogues allow little diversion from the main interrogatory, and proceed rigidly from a question to an answer, which in turn leads to another series of questions and answers. The "Protagoras," in particular, follows this question and answer format so that at times, it seems as if the dialogue is one long set of logical puzzles; but unlike a real puzzle, all the pieces are not in place by the end of the dialogue. In fact, at the end of the dialogue, the positions of Protagoras and Socrates have been reversed, but the question of whether virtue can be taught remains unanswered.

If the early dialogues are marked by an attempt to define concepts, and are developed through a series of questions and answers, designed to produce tentative conclusions, then the middle and later dialogues can be seen as refinements in the art of definition which in some cases, produce satisfying results. The “Phaedrus” explores the concepts of love and friendship that were introduced in “Lysis,” but did not result in a satisfactory definition of these terms. The initial portion of “Phaedrus” seems destined to repeat the failure to produce a definition of friendship, in much the same way as in “Lysis.”

Socrates once again asks a series of questions about friendship and is rewarded with a series of commonplace answers. He is about to take his leave of Phaedrus, when his daemon prevents him from departing, warning him that he has insulted the gods through his simple answers. Socrates then begins a monologue in which he tells Phaedrus about the existence of the soul, and the ability of the soul to perceive beauty, truth, and justice. The lover apprehending true beauty, perceives his love as a reflection of this ultimate beauty which “. . . passing through the eyes which are the windows of the soul, come[s] back to the beautiful one” (Plato, 129). Unlike the earlier dialogues, “Phaedrus” defines the nature of friendship and love, and produces a satisfying conclusion.

Where “Phaedrus” successfully provides the definition of love, the “Symposium” begins by taking up another of the themes raised in an earlier dialogue: whether knowledge can be transmitted from one person to another. This theme is soon abandoned and the theme of love becomes the focus of the dialogue. In this regard, the “Symposium” should be read in conjunction with “Phaedrus,” for Socrates expands upon the concept of love first raised in “Phaedrus.” Socrates relates that his ideas about love were revealed to him by Diotima, and that she believed that love was a search for, and an attempt to possess, that which is good. Further, she intimated that not only did men want to possess that which is good, but that they want to possess the good for eternity. It is this striving for the good which leads to a search for immortality: the best way for a mortal creature to become immortal is through procreation.

The striving for immortality through procreation is a striving for a lower form of beauty, the beauty of the body; far greater is the beauty of the soul. Diotima then goes on to relate what would happen if mankind were able to perceive true beauty:

> But what if man had eyes to see true beauty--the divine beauty, I mean, pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality and all the colours and vanities of human life--thither looking, and holding converse with the true beauty simple and divine? . . . and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may. Would this be an ignoble life? (Plato 167)

In the “Symposium,” Socrates develops his idea of love, an idea based on the forms of beauty and good, and takes these ideas one step further: they enable he and his interlocutors the ability to understand and approach God.

The “Meno” is concerned with the idea of virtue. It takes up the theme of virtue from “Laches;” but whereas the “Laches” failed to define virtue, “Meno” succeeds. As with all the Socratic dialogues, the “Meno” starts with a series of definitions that are soon shown to be incomplete. In the process of arriving at a definition of virtue, Socrates demonstrates his theory of the recollection of knowledge by eliciting a series of geometrical answers from a slave boy who provides correct answers through prompts given him by Socrates. After this brief diversion, which is included to demonstrate that virtue is not synonymous with knowledge, Socrates and Meno once again search for the definition of virtue. Meno and his friend Anytus offer up definitions of virtue which liken it to that which is good or profitable and affirm that virtue can be taught. Socrates debunks each of these assertions and concludes that “. . . virtue comes to the virtuous by the gift of God” (Plato, 190).

As demonstrated through examples in “Phaedrus,” the “Symposium,” and “Meno,” the middle dialogues succeed in offering definitions for the concepts of love and virtue, and in the process the theory of forms begins to take shape. In *The Republic*, Plato will expand upon the notion of the forms and develop the metaphor of the cave to demonstrate how people perceive the forms in this world. The middle dialogues succeed in the development of definitions for several reasons; primary among them is the maturation of the theory of forms. A second reason for the success of the middle dialogues in developing definitions is a revision of the dialectic method so that asides are permitted, and even enhanced, as a means of developing the argument. Where the earlier dialogues rely upon a strict question and answer format, the middle dialogues introduce characters such as Diotima, who are not strictly necessary for the dialogue to advance.  Finally, these dialogues have a more relaxed feel to them, and a length which allows them to proceed at a more steady pace.  Where the earlier dialogues felt stressful and hurried (in the “Laches” the idea of a definition of virtue was seen as being beyond the scope of the dialogue), the middle dialogues take their time to arrive at definitions; hence in the “Meno” the meaning of virtue is debated and agreed.

If the middle dialogues represent a breakthrough in Plato’s ability to refine the dialectic process and develop effective definitions of concepts such as love, friendship and virtue, the later dialogues allow the philosopher a means to develop a process to arrive at definitions of “things in themselves.”  In the “Theaetetus,” we are introduced to the process of definition-making.  In this dialogue, Plato returns to one of his favorite themes:  the ability to understand and define knowledge.  Unlike the earlier dialogues which did not reach a conclusion regarding the ability of one person to teach another person, “Theaetetus” develops a tentative definition of knowledge.

The “Theaetetus” starts off inauspiciously, haunted as it were by the ghosts of earlier philosophers, who aver that everything is change (Protagoras), or everything is constant and unified (Parmenides).  Faced with the conflict between these two schools of thought, Socrates directs his inquiries with his usual tenacity; but something has changed in his approach:  rather than rely on the static question and answer format of the earlier dialogues, Socrates’ questions take on a new character.  The search for answers results in a tentative initial definition which, in turn leads to a subdivision of the original definition; this process continues until a final result is achieved.  This technique is not finalized in the “Theaetetus;” that task is left for the “Sophist” and “Statesman;” yet the technique is new and remarkably successful.  At the end of the dialogue, Socrates and Theaetetus have worked out a definition of knowledge which Socrates acknowledges to be acceptable: "And so, when the question is asked, What is knowledge? this fair argument will answer 'Right opinion with knowledge'--knowledge, that is, of the difference, for this, as the said argument maintains, is adding the definition" (Plato, 549).

The "Sophist" takes this new form of arriving at definitions and sets up a blueprint for the process of defining "the thing in itself." Ostensibly, the "Sophist" deals with the need to distinguish the sophist, or "pretender to knowledge" from the true philosopher who pursues knowledge so that he may lead the good life. While the dialogue succeeds on this level, differentiating the sophist from the philosopher, on a second level, it produces a method to develop "an understanding about the thing itself in terms of a definition and not merely about the name minus the definition" (Plato, 552).

As was the case with the "Theaetetus," the Stranger, Theodorus, Theaetetus and a strangely quiet Socrates begin with a tentative definition, and then proceed to subdivide the definition until they can make no further subdivisions. At one point, the discussion seems to produce too many definitions of a sophist, and the Stranger warns them that:

> . . . when the professor of any art has one name and many kinds of knowledge, there must be something wrong? The multiplicity of names which is applied to him [the Sophist] shows that the common principle to which all these branches of knowledge are tending, isn't understood. (Plato, 559)

Yet, the conversation proceeds by slow degrees until a definition of a sophist is reached.

The relaxation of the dialectic method that was seen in the middle dialogues continues in the later dialogues; by now, Plato feels no compunction in taking side paths to explore new concepts, all the while marching toward his final destination. One such side path explored in the “Sophist” is the notion of being and not-being. Plato introduces this concept by saying that the sophist retreats into not-being in an attempt to discredit his methods. Plato, not content to allow this distraction to undermine his work, defines being and not-being in order to take away the last refuge of the sophist. This diversion yields a definition of being and not-being that in the hands of a lesser philosopher would require a separate dialogue. Being, as defined by the Stranger is:

> . . .anything which possesses any sort of power to affect another, or to be affected by another, if only for a single moment, however trifling the cause and however slight the effect, has real existence; and I hold that the definition of being is simply power. (Plato, 568)

To this definition of being is added his definition of not-being: “When we speak of not-being, we speak, I suppose, not of something opposed to being, but only different” (Plato, 573). On the way to defining the sophist, Plato stops to define being and not-being, and so sheds light on the area where the sophists hides “in the darkness of not-being” (Plato, 571).

To ensure that his method of arriving at the essence of the “thing itself” is not lost on the reader, Plato provides a summary of the method used to define the sophist:

> He, then who traces the pedigree of his art as follows--who, belonging to the conscious or dissembling section of the art of causing self-contradiction, is an imitator of appearance, and is separated from the class of phantastic which is a branch of image-making into that further division of creation, the juggling of words, a creation human, and not divine--any one who affirms the real Sophist to be of this blood and lineage will say the very truth. (Plato, 579)

The “Sophist” and later dialogues witness the final stages in the development of the Socratic Method. No longer does Plato present tentative, incomplete definitions of “things in themselves.” Instead, he has developed a method to lead to a definition of the “thing itself in terms of a definition and not merely about the name minus the definition” (Plato, 552).

This achievement is the final result of the Socratic Method. It marks the transition from a series of questions intended to yield some portion of truth, to a method that reduces an object to its most basic essence, therefore yielding the closest approximation to truth that a man may know. Yet Plato knows that definition does not yield up all knowledge: that blessing is reserved for the gods. In the end, Plato, like his friend Socrates, must rely on faith for the final definitions. Perhaps the greatest lesson to be learned from the Socratic Method is that, in the end, concepts like virtue, friendship, love and courage, while incapable of being fully defined, can be witnessed. “Such was the end, Echecrates, of our friend; concerning whom I may truly say, that of all the men of his time whom I have known, he was the wisest and justest and best (Plato, 251).

## Works Cited

1. Plato. *The Dialogues of Plato*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. *Great Books of the Western World*. Ed. Mortimer J. Adler. 2 ed. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Brittanica. 814. Vol. 6 of 60 vols., 2007.