

A Practical Guide
for Philosophers

Dialectic

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Dialectic – A Practical Guide for Philosophers

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“Dialectic, then, as you will agree,
is the coping-stone of the sciences,
and is set over them; no other science
can be placed higher—the nature
of knowledge can no further go.”



Plato: Republic VII, 534e

Introduction

Are you a person who is drawn to go 'behind the scenes'? To explore matters more deeply? To connect with the unseen qualities that you suspect lie beyond appearances? If so, it could be that you have a touch of the philosopher in your nature. It is the philosopher who will often be found quietly considering, enquiring, seeking. And what is he or she seeking? Perhaps it is knowledge, perhaps peace, or perhaps a just and happy society. In western terminology, the goal for the philosopher could be said to be wisdom.

In order to gain access to wisdom, the philosopher must make use of a faculty of mind, which is uniquely available to the human being – this faculty is reason.

It is reason which has the capacity to recognize truth. If truth is to be discovered, it is reason which must ultimately take precedence over our likes and dislikes, feelings, prejudices and presuppositions. Reason is innate in all of us, but we need to hone our ability to use it and to do that we need a tool. One such tool is dialectic.

Plato (in his "Dialogues") has given us a perfect example of the use of dialectic by the great philosopher, Socrates. Socrates himself referred to dialectic as the highest 'science', and it was dialectic that he used in his unrelenting search for true knowledge.

In this booklet, using the Platonic Dialogues as a guide, five principles are presented. It is for us to see how we might make these practical in our own personal search for wisdom.

Socrates said “The unexamined life is not worth living”¹. Our first step in appreciating these five principles will be to examine how they apply to us in everyday life. We will need to engage in some self-examination and the results will be best seen in practice.

The booklet is not intended to be an exhaustive study of the nature of dialectic, but simply a start on a practical approach to help us to discover its potential.

1 Plato: Apology, 38a



Truth is the goal

“Then hear me, Gorgias, for I am quite sure that if there ever was a man who entered on the discussion of a matter from a pure love of knowing the truth, I am such a one, and I should say the same of you.”



Plato: *Gorgias*, 453a

Socrates spent his life in pursuit of knowledge, believing that Truth can be found within the soul of every person. He persisted with his questioning in order that what he sought might be declared through the voices of his companions. He worked through one question at a time, patiently examining various aspects of each, never moving forward until a resolution had been established. If the answers were not forthcoming, he might leave it for another day, but he would never move forward from a platform of untruth. Socrates paid the ultimate price for his love of truth – he was executed by the state, but his legacy endures 2,400 years later.

WHAT IS TRUTH?

This was the famous question asked of Jesus by Pontius Pilate. In this day and age it is still asked, and it is accompanied by an overriding presumption that truth is relative. The concept of absolute truth is covered over with a notion of 'my truth' and 'my truth is as valid as that of the next man'. Socrates had no sympathy with this notion.

“For would not the investigation of one another's fancies and opinions, and the attempt to refute them, when each man insists that his own are right, be a tedious and blatant folly?”



Plato: Theaetetus, 162a.

The Platonic Dialogues are permeated with a concept usually referred to as the ‘Theory of Forms’, or the Theory of Ideas – the forms or ideas representing the unchanging, eternal causes that lie at the source of physical manifestation. We get a sense of this concept in the Dialogues as a constant pointing to ‘absolutes’ – the aim of all Socratic enquiry. The reader becomes tantalizingly aware of absolute beauty, absolute justice, absolute courage, and absolute truth hovering in the background, silently awaiting discovery.

It is these ‘absolutes’ that Socrates looked to as his goal.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- In meeting the considerations of daily life, do I, like Socrates, pursue matters to a truthful conclusion?
- What would cause me to stop short? Make a list.
- Are there any items on my list which I am prepared to surrender?
- Are there any items on my list which I am not prepared to surrender?
- How far am I prepared to go to find truth?

PRACTICAL EXERCISES

Exercise 1

Look for a situation where you expect to have a conversation with another person (or persons). It can be about any subject whatsoever. Make a resolve to enter the conversation, holding in mind the sentence "Truth is the goal".

Observe what happens. Don't try to change anything. Just keep watching, holding the sentence in mind without any expectation of what might follow.

The sentence "Truth is the goal" is an appeal to reason, and will serve as an aid in any endeavor to strengthen this faculty.

Practise this as often as you can.

Exercise 2

Look for a conversation where you are considering a particular issue. For example, it may be a simple question "Which movie shall we see tonight?", or perhaps something more important – "Which school should we send our child to?" Ask a further question – "Is there something larger at stake here?" Keep asking that question.

Be Willing to be Refuted

“I am one of those who are very willing to be refuted if I say anything which is not true, and very willing to refute any one else who says what is not true, and quite as ready to be refuted as to refute...”

Plato's Allegory of the Cave² demonstrates man's inclination to trust what his senses tell him, and not trust what he cannot perceive with his senses. The images seen by those trapped inside Plato's cave are mere shadows with no substance or validity. The man who is released from the cave and discerns true realities in the light, is derided for his stupidity by those who remain below in the dark. While we fail to allow for the possibility of realities beyond the reach of our senses and lower intellect, we will continue to adamantly insist on the truth of our poorly informed conclusions. We will continue to thump the table declaring black to be white, simply because that's the way it seems to us.

Socrates made no bones about refuting others when he considered them to be in error, but perhaps more importantly, he made it clear that he himself would prefer to be proved wrong rather than fall into error. He even goes so far as to say:

“...I would rather that the whole world should be at odds with me, and oppose me, rather than that I myself should be at odds with myself, and contradict myself.”



Plato: Gorgias, 482b

² Plato: Republic VII, 514a

While we hold to an erroneous position we run the risk of falling into injustice, which according to Socrates, is the greatest evil. We run the risk of committing an error, possibly throughout a whole lifetime, not only our own, but of those who come within our influence.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- Do I ever express strong opinions?
- Are my opinions always valid?
- On what do I base my evaluation of what is valid?
- Do I find it difficult to be refuted?
- Are there subjects about which I am unwilling to be refuted?
- Consider a time when I tried to avoid being exposed as being in error.
- Might I have handled the situation differently?

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Watch for a time when you are taking up a set position based on your own personal point of view. Bring to mind the sentence **“Be willing to be refuted”**. This may take some considerable presence of mind if your point of view is strongly held.

You may notice some indicators, which will alert you to the impending possibility of taking up a set position:

- Agitation in the mind or body
- A degree of attachment to your own point of view
- A desire to ‘win’
- Reluctance to listen to other points of view
- Holding to an obviously unreasonable position
- Criticism of other people present
- A sense of “I know better” or “I’m right”

While you are holding to a position, the truth is not the priority. Just allow the sentence **“Be willing to be refuted”** to be there. You may find yourself unwilling to give any ground at all, but the sentence could well have the power to change that. Observe what happens.

Practise this as often as you can.

It is evident when reading the Dialogues that Socrates does not miss a single word spoken by those with whom he is conversing. For Socrates, those precise words provide the very foundation for future discussion.

We may have had a conversation where our words have not been listened to. The experience can range from moderate to severe discomfort and usually results in a lack of progress in finding resolution or harmony.

Examples abound of public failures to listen, resulting in failures in relationships, corporate bungling, industrial 'in-fighting', even global war. A whole industry has arisen to address the inability of the world to listen, incorporating psychoanalysis, counselling, facilitation and mediation.

The power of attentive listening cannot be overestimated. It has the capacity to subdue the busy mental activity that tends to cloud the mind, bringing it to a point of stillness from which finer realms may be contemplated. This point of stillness is sometimes referred to as the 'present moment' – that state which is full of potential, poised, clear, waiting.

It is this condition that is needed for the operation of reason.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- How do I rate my ability to listen?
- In the past week, have there been any conversations where I was fully present and attentive?
- What inspired me to stay present and attentive?
- In the past week, have there been any conversations when I was not present and attentive?
- What induced me to stop paying attention?

Make a list (use the list below as an aid to getting started).

- Concerned about time
- What I think of the person speaking
- What I think of what is being said
- What I think about something else altogether
- What I'm going to do next
- Something else going on in the room
- My own viewpoint

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Fortunately, listening is something that you don't have to wait long for an opportunity to practise. Unless you are living in solitary confinement, you will be frequently meeting people and hearing speech and other sounds in your normal, everyday life.

The particular focus for this exercise is to **listen precisely with interest** when in a conversation with another person. You don't need to be choosy with whom you practise. Absolutely everyone qualifies. Socrates said that he was very concerned about any words being lost. Listen with a determination that nothing will be lost.



Question

“The reproach that is often made against me, that I ask questions of others and have not the wit to answer them myself, is very just.”



Plato: Theaetetus, 150c

“Come, then, and let us see what we really mean about rhetoric; for I do not know what my own meaning is as yet.”



Plato: Gorgias, 455b

Socrates declared unashamedly that he knew nothing³ and then proceeded to devote his life to asking questions, never claiming to have the answers himself. Rather, he showed a willingness to explore, with no platform of prior knowledge of any subject under consideration.

There are many types of questions. There are questions for gleaning information, rhetorical questions, empathetic questions, clever questions, vague questions, probing questions and invasive questions.

The key to asking good questions is presence of mind. Real questions are relevant, are usually free of complexity and not loaded with hidden agendas.

Socrates made his agenda very clear.

3 Plato: Apology, 21d

“But why, if I have a suspicion do I ask instead of telling you? Not for your sake, but in order that the argument may proceed in such a manner as is most likely to set forth the truth.”



Plato: Gorgias, 453c

Socrates describes his practice of questioning as ‘midwifery’. Simply by asking questions, it is possible to coax the knowledge out of its hiding place. The midwife does not have the knowledge, but without the midwife, the knowledge might never be brought to birth.

“Help me then to draw out the conclusion which follows from our admissions; for it is good to repeat and review what is good twice and thrice over, as they say.”



Plato: Gorgias, 499a

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- Are there any areas in my life where my pre-conceived ideas stop me from questioning further?
- What is the effect of this?
- Is it possible that there may be more to be discovered?
- Is it possible that my present knowledge could be limited?
- Is it possible that 'enquiry' might throw more light on the subject?
- At what point could I honestly say that I know all there is to know about a subject?

Have you noticed that you have just asked yourself a number of questions? Did you discover anything that was not clear to you prior to asking the questions?

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

- Get some practice at asking questions.
- This may not come as easily as you might first think. Apply yourself to this task of asking questions in a variety of situations.

Be prepared to appear 'ignorant' and take the plunge. Ask the bus driver, ask your colleagues, ask members of your family, ask anyone at all. You'll soon get the hang of it.

Just start asking questions.

Now that we have unlocked the flow of information, we need an approach which will lead this information to our ultimate goal of truth.

A typical discussion with Socrates starts with a question which is followed by an answer. The answer is treated as a proposition, which Socrates proceeds to examine. Inevitably, errors are discovered, the proposition is amended and resubmitted for examination – and so the process repeats.

This simple sequence is demonstrated in the Republic⁴, which quickly launches into an enquiry about the nature of justice. It is proposed by Cephalus that justice is speaking the truth and paying your debts. Socrates replies “But as concerning justice, what is it? – to speak the truth and to pay your debts – no more than this? And even to this there are not exceptions?”. Socrates proceeds to suggest an exception. The definition is found to be flawed, and fails to provide an adequate appreciation of the true nature of justice. Further questioning is required.

The ultimate goal of the discovery of the true nature of justice has not been reached, but a step has been taken along the way.

The Republic goes on to examine the nature of happiness, the immortality of the soul and the governance of society. The Republic has proved to be one of the world’s most influential philosophical works, and it is all based on questions and answers.

4 Plato: Republic 1, 331a

The key is to follow. It is not possible to know what another person is going to say. To predict another's response is to draw on our own past experience. Our prior 'knowledge' is the very thing that will block the emergence of what is truly relevant.

To follow the thread leading to true knowledge is the ultimate challenge and the reward is great. Reason will evaluate the answers as they come, and reason will reveal the next step. Reason will refer to the universal concepts reflecting in our souls, pointing the way to absolute Truth.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- Do I find it challenging to follow the lead of another?
- Does my 'following' depend on certain conditions?
- Do I ever find myself in conflict situations?
- Consider one such situation. Could it have been avoided if I had followed the other party more closely?
- Do I find myself predicting what another person is going to say?
- Am I prepared to wait until the other person has finished speaking before formulating my answer?

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

During a conversation, make use of what you have practised so far – let truth be the goal, be willing to be refuted, listen and ask questions.

When you receive an answer, remain very still, and wait for a response to form in your mind. Avoid any temptation to jump in quickly with your reply about what has been said, or how what has been said relates to some other situation.

Simply wait and allow the next step to present itself in the mind.

Conclusion

We have examined some practical aids which can be used not only in our search for ultimate truth, but in the everyday situations that are presented to us in life. Either way, they will help us to take some tentative steps into the realms of Dialectic.

Dialectic itself has ancient roots and would require a serious study to fully discover its secrets. Practice of these simple principles will help us explore some of its benefits and provide an invaluable aid in our search for absolute Truth.

- Truth is the goal
- Be willing to be refuted
- Listen
- Question
- Follow

Good luck with your efforts.

“The dialectical effort is an ascent in common towards the truth and towards the good, ‘which every soul pursues’. It is the spirit's itinerary towards the divine.”



Pierre Hadot "Philosophy As a Way of Life"

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