

The Socratic Method as a Mode of Philosophical Inquiry: Dialogue, Questioning, and the Search for Truth

Dr. Sanjeev Veer Singh Priyadarshi ¹

Received: 20 September 2026 / Accepted: 27 September 2026 / Published online: 30 September 2026
Copyright © 2026 Author(s). Published by Siri Research Foundation. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

Abstract

The Socratic Method occupies a foundational position in the history of Western philosophy and continues to influence contemporary approaches to philosophical inquiry, education, and critical thinking. Associated primarily with Socrates as represented in the dialogues of Plato, the method is characterized by persistent questioning, examination of assumptions, logical clarification, and the recognition of one's own intellectual limitations. Rather than presenting philosophy as the passive acquisition of established doctrines, the Socratic Method understands philosophical inquiry as an active and dialogical process. This paper examines the Socratic Method as a distinctive mode of philosophical inquiry, focusing particularly on the relationship between dialogue, questioning, and the search for truth. It argues that Socratic questioning is not merely a pedagogical technique but a philosophical practice aimed at transforming the individual's relationship to knowledge. Through the elenchus, or method of examination and refutation, Socrates exposes contradictions within commonly held beliefs and encourages interlocutors to reconsider their assumptions. His profession of ignorance further complicates the conventional distinction between teacher and student, positioning philosophical knowledge as an ongoing search rather than a possession. The paper also considers the importance of dialogue in the Socratic conception of philosophy, the role of aporia or puzzlement, and the ethical implications of the examined life. Finally, it evaluates the continuing relevance and limitations of the Socratic Method in contemporary intellectual and educational contexts. The paper concludes that Socratic inquiry remains significant because it connects knowledge with self-examination, rational dialogue, intellectual humility, and the continuous pursuit of truth.

Keywords: Socratic method; Socrates; philosophical dialogue; elenchus; questioning; truth; knowledge; aporia; critical thinking; examined life.

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, DAV PG College, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India

✉ Dr. Sanjeev Veer Singh Priyadarshi, E-mail: sansuraj781@gmail.com

Introduction

Philosophy has often been understood as a search for wisdom, knowledge, and truth. Yet the question of how such a search should be conducted is itself philosophical. Should philosophical knowledge be transmitted through doctrines and authoritative teachings, or should it emerge through questioning, discussion, and critical examination? The philosophical practice associated with Socrates provides one of the most influential answers to this question. Instead of constructing a systematic philosophical doctrine, Socrates is represented as engaging individuals in conversations concerning justice, virtue, knowledge, courage, piety, and the good life. His distinctive practice of asking questions became the basis of what is now commonly called the Socratic method. “Socratic discussion is a form of philosophical dialogue, and its popularity is one of the signs of a returning interest in philosophical dialogue or discussion.”¹

Socrates left no written works of his own. Knowledge of his philosophical activity comes primarily from sources such as Plato, Xenophon, Aristophanes, and later authors. Among these, Plato's dialogues have had the greatest influence on philosophical interpretations of Socrates. Although the historical relationship between Plato's literary Socrates and the historical Socrates remains a matter of scholarly debate, the dialogues provide a rich representation of philosophical inquiry as a dialogical activity.

The Socratic method is frequently reduced to a classroom technique in which a teacher asks a sequence of questions rather than directly providing answers. Such an interpretation, although useful, does not fully capture its philosophical significance. For Socrates, questioning is not simply a strategy for teaching students to think critically. It is a way of confronting the assumptions upon which individuals construct their understanding of themselves and the world. Socratic inquiry therefore has both epistemological and ethical dimensions.

The method begins with a seemingly simple question: What is justice? What is courage? What is virtue? What is knowledge? The apparent simplicity of these questions conceals their philosophical difficulty. Individuals commonly possess opinions about such concepts, but Socratic dialogue reveals that possessing an opinion is not equivalent to possessing knowledge. Through a process of questioning, clarification, examination, and refutation, the interlocutor may discover that a belief initially regarded as certain is inconsistent or insufficiently justified.

This process often leads to *aporia*, a state of puzzlement or intellectual perplexity. Rather than representing a failure of philosophy, *aporia* can constitute an important stage in philosophical inquiry. Recognizing that one does not adequately understand something can be the beginning of genuine inquiry. Socrates' famous association with wisdom and ignorance reflects precisely this point: intellectual humility is necessary for the pursuit of knowledge.

This paper examines the Socratic method as a mode of philosophical inquiry by focusing on three interconnected elements: dialogue, questioning, and the search for truth. It argues that the distinctive character of Socratic philosophy lies not in providing final answers but in creating conditions under which beliefs can be examined, challenged, and potentially transformed.

Socrates and the Origins of the Socratic Method

The figure of Socrates occupies a unique position in ancient philosophy. Unlike many pre-Socratic thinkers and later philosophers, he did not leave behind a written philosophical system. His philosophical identity is consequently inseparable from the dialogues and testimonies of others. "The method of enquiry of Socrates was conversational. Conversation invariably was limited to ethical subject-matter, for Socrates was trying to know his own self. The subject matter of conversation included the nature of justice, virtue, knowledge, temperance etc."²

Plato's dialogues frequently depict Socrates as engaging in conversations with people who believe that they possess knowledge about important concepts. In the *Apology*, Socrates explains his philosophical activity through an investigation prompted by the claim of the Delphic oracle that no one was wiser than Socrates. Socrates initially finds the claim difficult to understand because he does not regard himself as wise. His subsequent investigations lead him to discover that many people who claim knowledge do not possess the understanding they believe they possess (Plato, *Apology* 21a–23b). "The conversational method of Socrates took the form of what is known as 'Dialectic'. The dialectic method is an art of argument by skilful question and answer. The answer to the question has to be answered in the fewest possible words, which should be precise and to the point."³

This episode illustrates a central feature of Socratic philosophy: the distinction between genuine knowledge and the belief that one possesses knowledge. Socrates' philosophical activity therefore begins not with certainty but with questioning. "The philosophical investigation is used to start with the generally accepted statements with regard to the subject-matter.....at the first stage of elaboration or explication of the thesis, no adverse question is allowed. Next, by way of anti-thesis and its possible rejection. The rejection of one hypothesis may lead to the acceptance of another hypothesis with less contradiction."⁴

The Socratic method is particularly associated with the *elenchus*, commonly translated as "refutation" or "cross-examination." In a typical Socratic exchange, an interlocutor makes a claim about a concept. Socrates asks questions designed to clarify the meaning and implications of that claim. Further answers are then elicited, sometimes resulting in a contradiction between the interlocutor's original position and subsequent commitments.

The significance of the *elenchus* is not simply that Socrates proves another person wrong. Its deeper function is to reveal the inadequacy of unexamined beliefs. Gregory Vlastos argues that the Socratic *elenchus* should be understood as a distinctive method through which Socrates tests the beliefs of his interlocutors and himself (Vlastos, 1991). The process makes philosophical dialogue an examination of the reasons supporting one's beliefs.

The Socratic method therefore represents a shift from philosophy understood primarily as the presentation of doctrines to philosophy understood as an activity of inquiry.

Dialogue as the Form of Philosophical Inquiry

One of the most important characteristics of Socratic philosophy is its dialogical form. Socrates does not generally present philosophical arguments as independent essays or treatises. Instead, philosophical problems emerge through conversations between individuals.

Dialogue is philosophically significant because it places beliefs in a relational context. An individual may regard a particular belief as obvious when considering it privately. However, once the belief is articulated publicly, another person can ask questions concerning its meaning, justification, implications, and consistency. Dialogue therefore makes thought answerable to reasons.

The dialogical structure also challenges intellectual authority. Socrates frequently encounters individuals who possess social status, professional expertise, or public reputation. Yet he does not automatically accept their claims to knowledge. Instead, he asks them to explain what they mean and why they believe what they claim to know. This feature is particularly evident in Plato's *Euthyphro*, where Socrates asks Euthyphro to explain the nature of piety. Euthyphro initially provides examples of pious actions, but Socrates seeks a general definition that can explain what all pious actions have in common (Plato, *Euthyphro* 5c–6e). The conversation illustrates a fundamental movement of philosophical inquiry: from individual examples toward conceptual understanding.

Dialogue thus performs a double function. First, it allows concepts to be examined through argument. Second, it transforms philosophy into a shared activity. The interlocutors participate in an investigation whose outcome cannot simply be determined in advance.

The dialogical nature of Socratic philosophy also distinguishes it from mere debate. Debate may aim at victory, persuasion, or the defeat of an opponent. Socratic dialogue, at least ideally, aims at examination and understanding. The question is not simply who is correct but whether the beliefs under consideration can withstand rational scrutiny.

Questioning and the Examination of Belief

Questioning is the central instrument of the Socratic method. Yet Socratic questions are not merely requests for information. They are philosophical instruments that expose assumptions.

Consider the difference between asking "What is justice?" and asking someone whether a particular action is just. The first question concerns the concept itself. Socrates repeatedly seeks such general definitions because particular judgments depend upon broader assumptions about concepts. In the *Republic*, for example, questions concerning justice eventually develop into a much broader investigation of the relationship between justice, the individual, and the political community (Plato, *Republic* I–IV). The method demonstrates how a seemingly ordinary concept can become the starting point for a complex philosophical inquiry. "By the process of dialectic enquiry, the investigation is led on to newer hypothesis with fewer and fewer contradiction."⁵

Socratic questioning also encourages individuals to distinguish between opinion and knowledge. An opinion may be correct by chance, but knowledge requires a stronger form of justification. The question "Why do you believe this?" therefore becomes as important as the question "What do you believe?" This emphasis on justification remains central to philosophical thinking. A claim is not philosophically adequate merely because it is widely accepted. It must be examined in relation to reasons and evidence.

The process can be uncomfortable because questioning threatens intellectual certainty. However, this discomfort is philosophically productive. If an individual

discovers that a belief cannot be defended, the discovery creates an opportunity for further inquiry.

Socratic questioning consequently has a negative and a positive dimension. Negatively, it dismantles unsupported assumptions. Positively, it creates the intellectual space required for more rigorous understanding. "he was interested in the correct method of acquiring knowledge more than in a theory of such a method, or methodology; he did not offer a theory at all, but practiced a method, lived it, and, by his example, taught others to follow it."⁶

Socratic Ignorance and Intellectual Humility

Perhaps the most paradoxical aspect of the Socratic method is Socrates' repeated claim that he does not possess wisdom. In the *Apology*, Socrates suggests that his wisdom consists partly in recognizing the limits of his knowledge.

This position should not be interpreted simply as false modesty. Socratic ignorance functions as a philosophical principle. The recognition "I do not know" is not the conclusion of inquiry but its beginning.

A person who believes that they already possess complete knowledge has little reason to investigate. By contrast, recognizing one's ignorance creates the possibility of learning. Socratic ignorance therefore represents intellectual humility: the willingness to acknowledge that one's beliefs may be incomplete, mistaken, or insufficiently justified. "By a process of induction, Socrates evolves definitions. With the help of examples, a provisional definition is formed; this is tested by other examples, and broadened or narrowed to meet the requirements until a satisfactory result has been reached."⁷

This principle has important implications for philosophical education. A student who merely memorizes philosophical conclusions may acquire information without developing the capacity to examine assumptions. The Socratic approach instead emphasizes the development of an active relationship with knowledge.

Socrates' claim to ignorance also destabilizes the conventional teacher-student relationship. He does not simply transfer knowledge from himself to others. Instead, he positions himself as a fellow participant in inquiry, even though his questioning frequently exposes weaknesses in the positions of his interlocutors. "Knowledge, then, is possible, after all. We can attain truth if we pursue the proper method, if we define our terms correctly, if we go back to first principles. Knowledge is concerned with the general and typical, not with the particular and accidental. This is what the Sophists failed to understand, and Socrates sets them right. He shared with them, however, the belief in the futility of physical and metaphysical speculations."⁸

This does not mean that Socrates is completely neutral or that he lacks philosophical commitments. His dialogues demonstrate strong commitments to rational examination, ethical self-care, and the importance of truth. Nevertheless, his method suggests that philosophical understanding cannot be reduced to the acceptance of conclusions handed down by authority. "Socrates' faith in knowledge, in clear and reasoned thinking, is strong,—so strong that he sees in it the cure of ills our. He applies his method to all human problems, particularly to the field of morality, and seeks to find a rational basis for conduct. The radical thinkers, as we saw, looked upon the ethical ideas and practices of their times as mere conventions; after all, might makes right. The conservatives regarded them as self-evident: rules of conduct are not things about which one can reason; they have to be obeyed. Socrates endeavors to

understand the meaning of morality, to discover- a rational principle of right and wrong, a criterion by which to measure it.”⁹

The Ethical Dimension of Socratic Inquiry

Socratic philosophy is not concerned with knowledge for its own sake alone. The pursuit of knowledge is closely connected to the question of how one ought to live.

In the *Apology*, Socrates presents the examined life as essential to human existence: "the unexamined life is not worth living" (Plato, *Apology* 38a). The statement captures the ethical significance of philosophical inquiry. "Socrates, as we have already pointed out, did not construct a system of metaphysics nor did he offer a theory of knowledge or of conduct. It remained for his pupils to build upon the foundations laid by the master. Some made the logical problems suggested by his method the subject of their study, others turned their attention to ethical questions and attempted to work out theories of ethics.”¹⁰

Self-examination requires individuals to investigate their values, desires, assumptions, and actions. Socratic philosophy therefore links epistemology with ethics. To know oneself is not merely to possess psychological information about oneself; it is to critically examine the principles according to which one lives.

This connection is also evident in Socrates' "living well." If philosophical examination reveals that a person's values are inconsistent or inadequately justified, the concern with virtue. Dialogues concerning courage, justice, piety, and temperance repeatedly return to the question of whether people genuinely understand the virtues they claim to possess.

Socratic inquiry thus challenges the separation between "knowing what is good" and "living well." If philosophical examination reveals that a person's values are inconsistent or inadequately justified, the discovery potentially requires a transformation of conduct.

The philosophical dialogue therefore becomes a form of ethical practice. Participants do not simply discuss abstract concepts; they examine the foundations of their lives.

The Socratic Method and the Pursuit of Truth

The search for truth is one of the central purposes of Socratic inquiry. However, truth in this context should not be understood merely as a collection of propositions. The Socratic search for truth involves an orientation toward intellectual honesty.

Socrates consistently challenges the tendency to accept claims because they are socially prestigious, traditional, or convenient. A philosophical claim must instead be examined through reasoned discussion. This emphasis has enduring significance. In modern societies, individuals encounter enormous quantities of information and conflicting claims. The ability to ask whether a claim is coherent, justified, and consistent with other commitments remains an essential intellectual skill. Socratic inquiry provides a model for such examination. It encourages questions such as:

- What exactly does this claim mean?
- What reasons support it?
- What assumptions does it depend upon?
- Does it contradict another belief that we hold?
- What would follow if the claim were true?
- Can we provide a counterexample?
- Are we confusing opinion with knowledge?

These questions demonstrate that truth-seeking requires more than confidence. It requires a willingness to subject one's own position to the same scrutiny applied to the positions of others.

This is perhaps the most demanding feature of the Socratic method. Genuine inquiry cannot consist merely of questioning other people. Socratic questioning ultimately turns back upon the questioner. Socrates claimed that the real knowledge of justice, virtue, and eternal ideas is already present in man. This knowledge is dormant, waiting to be recollected by skilful questioning.”¹¹

Conclusion

The Socratic method represents one of the most influential models of philosophical inquiry in the history of philosophy. Its central features—dialogue, questioning, examination, intellectual humility, and the search for truth—remain relevant because they address fundamental problems concerning how human beings form and justify beliefs.

As a mode of inquiry, the Socratic method differs from approaches that begin with established conclusions. Socratic philosophy begins with questions. Through dialogue, individuals articulate their beliefs; through questioning, those beliefs are examined; through refutation, inconsistencies may be exposed; and through aporia, individuals may recognize the limits of their understanding.

The importance of the method therefore lies not simply in obtaining answers. It lies in transforming the relationship between the individual and knowledge. Socrates' philosophical significance emerges from his insistence that people should not remain satisfied with beliefs merely because those beliefs are familiar or socially accepted. The connection between questioning and truth is also inseparable from the ethical dimension of Socratic philosophy. The examined life requires individuals to reflect upon the principles that govern their actions. Philosophical inquiry consequently becomes a practice of self-examination.

At the same time, the Socratic method should not be romanticized. Socratic dialogue can become adversarial, may expose contradictions without producing definitive solutions, and depends heavily upon the quality and fairness of the questions being asked. Nevertheless, these limitations do not diminish its philosophical importance. Instead, they demonstrate why the method must be practiced with intellectual humility and respect for dialogue.

Ultimately, the Socratic method presents philosophy not as the passive possession of final answers but as a continuous activity of questioning and examination. Its enduring lesson is that the search for truth begins with the willingness to question what one thinks one already knows. In this sense, Socratic inquiry remains not only a historical method but a continuing model of philosophical life: to question carefully, to reason openly, to recognize one's limitations, and to remain committed to the pursuit of understanding.

Notes and References

¹ I will use the terms 'dialogue' and 'discussion' interchangeably, *International Review of Education*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01099293>

² Y. Masih, *A Critical History of Western Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2010), 40.

³ Ibid, p-40

⁴ Ibid,p- 41

⁵ Ibid, P- 41

⁶ Frank Thilly, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1914), 52.

⁷ Ibid, P- 54.

⁸ Ibid, P- 55

⁹ Ibid, P- 56

¹⁰ Ibid, P- 56

¹¹ Masih, *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*, 41.

Bibliography

Masih, Y. *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2010.

Thilly, Frank. *A History of Western Philosophy*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1914.

Rembert, R.B. Socrates, discussion and moral education. *International Review of Education* 41, 97–108 (1995). <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01099293>

Plato. *Apology*. Translated by Hugh Tredennick. London: Penguin Books, 1969.

Plato. *Euthyphro*. Translated by Hugh Tredennick. London: Penguin Books, 1969.

Plato. *Republic*. Translated by C. J. Rowe. London: Penguin Books, 2012.