# WAS SOCRATES VIOLENT?

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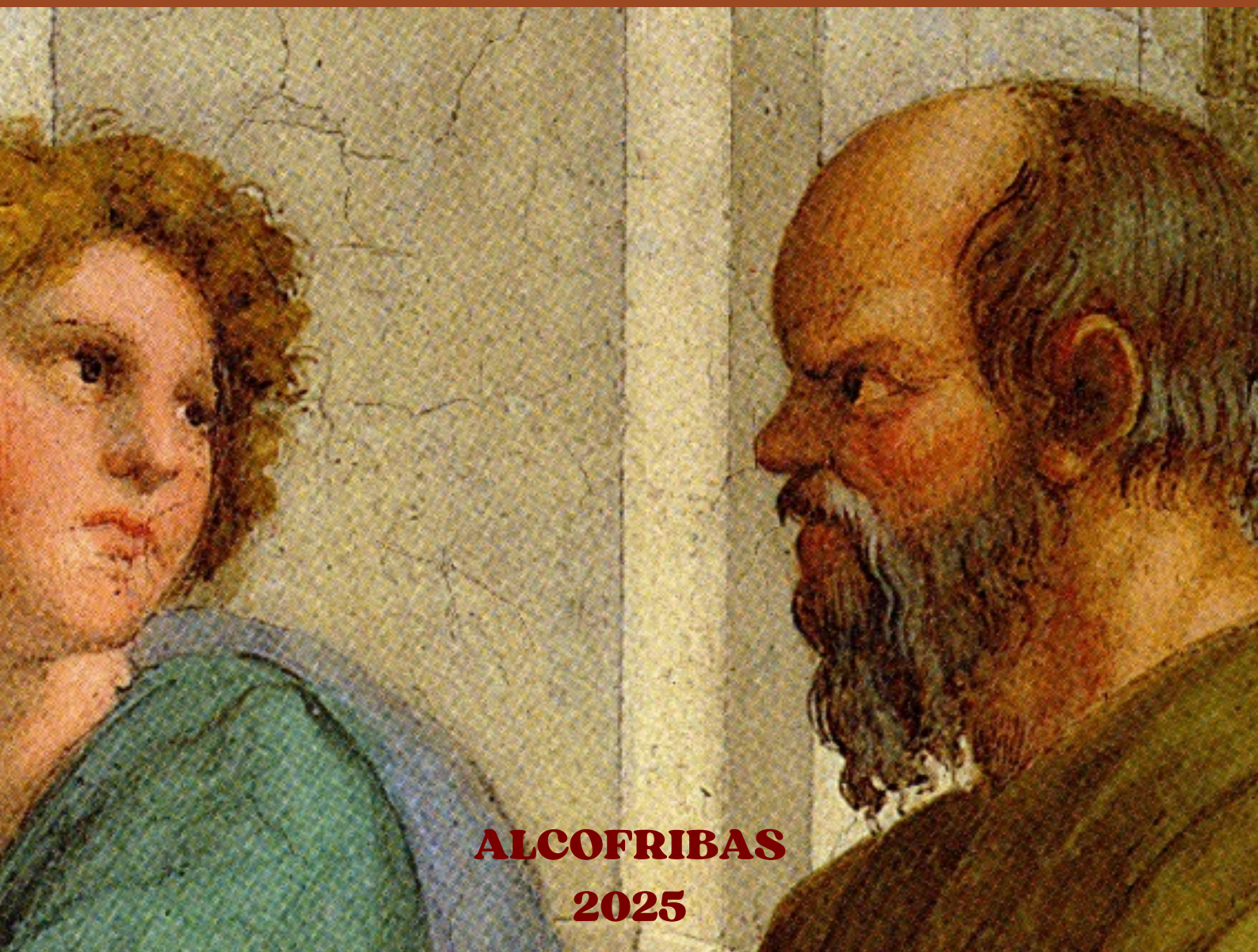

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# Was Socrates Violent?

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## THE SOCRATIC SUBVERSION

Socrates may be seen as violent, even accused of taking power in his dialogues with interlocutors, although such accusations remain open to debate. Yet they ultimately led to his condemnation and death; one may therefore conclude that there was some truth in them, and that these harsh criticisms were not without foundation. His manner of proceeding broke decisively with prevailing social codes. His dialectical method, formidable in its rigor, often exasperated interlocutors through techniques designed to expose their contradictions and ignorance. It radically disrupted the accepted codes of discussion in classical Athens, both in form and in substance. Let us consider why it could be perceived as revolutionary, even provocative.

It already marked a rupture with traditional rhetoric, where the usual codes involved lengthy prepared speeches, ceremonial, judicial, or persuasive, delivered to celebrate the present, to assess the past, or to deliberate on the future and the actions to be taken. The aim was persuasion through eloquence. Socrates, by contrast, relied on brief questions rather than monologues, a form of intrusion into the orator's discourse. This amounted to dismantling arguments from authority, for instance by ironically asking, *"You who are wise, define virtue for me"*, a most destabilizing demand. He also attacked rhetorical form itself, rejecting stylistic complications, inviting his interlocutors to avoid oratorical style or embellishment, and tell the truth simply, without artifice. He

attempts to impose a synthetic discourse, he often asked for concise definitions or clear rephrasings to better focus on the issue under discussion. He subverted hierarchical relations by refusing to acknowledge authority tied to age, reputation, or political office. He rejected the conventional codes whereby the young deferred to the old, the pupil to the master, the listener to the orator deemed more learned. Thus roles were inverted: an artisan or even a slave might "teach" a general. He was taking an egalitarian posture when he describes himself as a guide without authority, and not a master, while still steering the exchanges, a subtle form of power. Yet this power was not pre-existing; it arose only through the exercise of reason. Such an approach shocked a society built on hierarchy, provoking anger, sometimes even violent reactions, among his interlocutors.

Socrates showed open contempt for social conventions, such as the respect owed to the "person," for he respected only reason, the rational capacity of the individual. A key convention, for example, was to avoid public humiliation in order to preserve honor, especially that of an authority figure. Socrates, however, did not hesitate to expose the ignorance of the orator, even "cruelly." Sometimes through direct confrontation: *"You do not even know what justice is, and yet you govern?"* Sometimes through biting irony: *"How wise you are, Euthyphro! Then explain to me…"*, which in fact implied, *"You are a fool!"* It is hardly surprising, then, that his "victims" condemned him for corrupting the youth, since he taught young listeners to question the established order. He openly rejected oratorical performance, that socially codified spectacle meant to win over audiences, who thus became partisans of the established "system" and of authorities skilled at pleasing the public, much like today's "opinion-makers."

Socrates in fact preferred private dialogue to public speech; he favored small

groups, more accessible to reason. For he cared about truth and understanding rather than persuasion, he prefers that the soul attain true knowledge rather than simply be convinced without really understanding. Agreement is only of secondary concern to him, except in a step-by-step logical approach, where the aim is to move forward together in the process of reflection. He privileged the unfolding of relentless logic over subjectivity and emotion, refusing any appeal to passions. Even when his own life was at stake, in *The Apology*, he refused to weep to sway the jury, though his fate depended on their response. He imposed, almost by force, a new ethic of dialogue, which scandalized his contemporaries. Coherence became paramount, with form taking precedence over content: for him, contradiction was a moral failing. His demand for definitions, *"What does this word mean?"* or "*What do you mean by that?*", inevitably led to systematic deconstruction of discourse, exposing its emptiness. In this sense he was ruthless: humiliation was legitimate if it led to truth. Unsurprisingly, the sophists denounced his behavior as a corruption of debate, a violation of decorum.

His stance was revolutionary and seditious because it "democratized" thought: anyone, a slave, a woman, or a foreigner, could philosophize, contrary to Athenian convention. He sought to impose rationality over tradition, subjecting customs, beliefs, and social rituals to critical examination. He upheld an ethic of truth rather than an ethic of social harmony grounded in established rules. Thus he could be regarded as a political threat, for his method undermined the very foundations of Athenian democracy, built on rhetoric rather than dialectic, which to many seemed destabilizing. His "violence," one might argue, lay in systematic doubt, in the equality of intelligences, and in truth as the sole authority, reason as the only criterion. One may conclude that the Athenians

did not kill him for his ideas, but for his "method," his way of being, of dialoguing, and of conducting himself, more subversive than a coup d'état.

## EPISTEMOLOGICAL RUPTURE

One of the "violences" practiced by Socrates, in his relation to the "sophistic" culture hegemonic in his time, was the epistemological rupture he embodied, though this rupture also concerned the confrontation with the habitual way in which human beings function. For one can oppose the practical and pragmatic approach of the sophists to Socrates' theoretical and moral quest, even though such an opposition requires some nuance, since certain sophists did in fact show more theoretical concerns. One must also recognize in this frontal opposition the imprint of Plato, a literary spirit who wished to dramatize the stakes and thus somewhat caricatured Socrates' opponents or enemies. Nevertheless, there is a measure of reality in this intellectual confrontation.

The sophists were concerned with practical efficiency, with utilitarian ends, and they advocated a certain moral and intellectual relativism. They thus taught the art of persuasion, rhetoric, as a means of success in public life, particularly in judicial and political arenas. Their aim was to train citizens capable of defending any thesis, regardless of its objective truth. For them, truth depended on context, as illustrated by Protagoras' famous dictum: "*Man is the measure of all things.*" Discourse served to convince, not necessarily to reason or to discover an "absolute" truth. They adopted a mercantile approach, charging dearly for their teaching, something Socrates criticized, for they were "selling" wisdom as a technique. Yet we should note that Socrates had no financial problems, partly by philosophical choice, since his way of life was austere, but also thanks to a

circle of loyal and wealthy friends who supported him, and to an Athenian society which, despite its tensions, allowed a free man to live in relative comfort. His relative poverty nevertheless contrasted with the wealth of the sophists, who sold their knowledge at a high price, a key difference in their opposition.

Socrates, perhaps also somewhat reshaped by Plato, sought universal definitions, for example: “What is courage? What is justice?” He used the maieutic art to make minds give birth, bringing forth knowledge presumed already present in the soul. He was in pursuit of truth. He distrusted rhetoric, accusing the sophists of manipulating opinions, of convincing and pleasing rather than seeking the truth. For him, discourse had to serve the good and virtue, not merely success, which required a constant critical examination of the ideas expressed. The sophists, on the other hand, advocated relativism, adaptation to people and circumstances, while Socrates sought the universal, the absolute. The sophists were concerned with the art of discourse and with social recognition, while Socrates advocated living according to the “good,” hence his famous saying, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” He opposed inner wisdom to “success.” Yet some sophists, like Prodicus, did take up ethical questions, and much of the critique of the sophists comes from Plato, who at times tended to caricature them. Moreover, Socrates himself had first studied with the sophists, and he used some of their techniques, such as irony and “trap” questions, but of course for a different purpose. Thus Socrates sought a transcendent truth, while the sophists prioritized the concrete effectiveness of discourse, which is more natural in the perpetual struggle for survival of the “human animal.”

# DOMINATION

One may say that Socrates imposed himself in the dialogues he provoked. Yet he imposed himself less through peremptory assertions, in an authoritarian or dogmatic manner, than through an implacable method, a strategic mastery of exchange that exposed the weaknesses of his adversaries. His genius was to make his interlocutors believe in an equal dialogue, while in reality he always mastered its mechanisms. In this sense, one can say that he “dominated” the exchanges, but for a noble end: to reveal the ignorance concealed behind false certainties. His insistent influence rested on his mastery of method and on his charisma, an imposition more or less “subtle.” His methodological domination operated by controlling the framework of dialogue through the maieutic art: he posed apparently innocent questions, guiding his interlocutor toward contradictions or sudden insights. With irony, feigning ignorance, the famous “I know only one thing, that I know nothing”, he pushed the other to expose his certainties so as to better deconstruct them. And through relentless questioning, he reduced his interlocutors to aporia, to absurdity, forcing them into silence or into anger. Thus many dialogues end without a clear resolution, leaving the interlocutor disoriented, while Socrates retains the moral and intellectual advantage as the one who has led the discussion into this cognitive “dead end.” He was often accused of having everything “prepared” in advance, of manipulating his interlocutors, without perceiving that the process unfolded naturally of itself, through the sheer power of rigorous reason. Thus, in the *Protagoras*, he turns the debate back against the sophist, who ends by conceding that virtue can indeed be taught, after having previously maintained precisely the opposite. Such accusations are usually founded on ignorance of the mechanics of dialectic, on the principle that every statement necessarily

contains its contrary. For Socrates, thought, reason, or truth stand opposed to opinion and to established truths.

One of Socrates' strengths was also his equanimity, which gave him moral and psychological authority and conferred upon him a certain power in dialogue. He possessed an intimidating charisma, a mastery of reasoning, and an effect on others reinforced, it was said, by the ugliness of his face. His composure in the face of sophists, who often grew angry, and his ability to ridicule his adversaries gave him a manifest superiority. His destabilizing strategy was evident: he chose predictable targets, politicians, poets, artisans, or soldiers, whom he knew to be incapable of justifying their pretensions to knowledge. This had a spectacular effect on young Athenians such as Plato, who admired his way of reducing the "wise" to silence.

Moreover, through his questioning he always managed to expose the personality of his interlocutor, his subjectivity, his individuality, which of course carried a critical dimension and tended to destabilize the person. "Socrates knows how to make you tell him your life, and afterward, you cannot escape his questions," it is written in *Alcibiades*. And in *Phaedrus*: *"Whoever converses with Socrates, whatever the subject under discussion, seems always to be speaking about himself.*" Socrates insisted that any serious philosophical discussion inevitably revealed the inner nature of the speaker. Indeed, for him, philosophy was not merely an exchange of abstract opinions but a probing investigation that brought to light the beliefs, values, and contradictions of the interlocutor. In the *Laches*, a dialogue on courage, Nicias, one of the participants, actually acknowledged that conversing with Socrates compelled one to rigorous self-examination: "As soon as you find yourself face to face with Socrates and engage in conversation with him, you are necessarily led,

whatever you do, never to cease giving an account of your life, of your present and past actions." Nicias does not use the term agon, but he describes the "agonistic" effect of the Socratic maieutics: a dialogue that becomes an intellectual and moral ordeal, where the interlocutor must defend his positions against implacable questioning. For Socrates, philosophy was a struggle against illusion, ignorance, and false certainties. Unlike Laches himself, who rejected such an exchange violently, Nicias admitted the usefulness of this confrontation, even if it was uncomfortable. He embodied a more reflective attitude, even if he remained unable fully to meet Socrates' demands.

Thus the true subject of discussion was never the "topic" being discussed, but the "subject" who was speaking. Whatever the initial theme, justice, beauty, or virtue, the discussion quickly became an introspective exploration. This process allowed interlocutors to discover their hidden ignorances or certainties, in order to live a "good" life. For one must specify that in the *Laches* it is not so much a matter of caring for one's soul as of caring for one's way of living, as Foucault showed in *The Courage of Truth*, where he juxtaposed the *Laches* and the *Alcibiades*. The *Alcibiades* presents the characteristics of the investigation and the care of the soul, while the *Laches* presents the characteristics of the care of the self as care of one's way of living, or of one's life (bios in Greek). For in Plato's Socrates there are two tendencies: one where epimeleia (the care of the self) concerns above all the soul, and one where it concerns above all the bios, life or way of living. The bios (way of life) and the psyche (soul) are not radically opposed, but orient the care of the self differently: one toward visible practice, the other toward the invisible structure of the subject. Thus it is not here a matter of introspection or of intimate unveiling of the soul, but rather of a relation to one's conduct of life, to the rectitude of one's action, to the bios.

In this respect, the dialogue fits more closely with what Foucault calls an aesthetics of existence, or a politics of the way of life.

Nevertheless, this underscores that any serious philosophical discourse inevitably leads to self-exploration, for the ideas we defend are never entirely impersonal; they reflect our desires, our prejudices, and our vision of the world. Socrates urges us to a certain intellectual honesty: he encourages each person to recognize his limits and to admit that he knows nothing, or very little, that he "speaks without knowing." Such humility is necessary before undertaking any genuinely philosophical inquiry. Thus, by asking apparently simple questions, Socrates brings his interlocutors to betray themselves, revealing their inner contradictions and blind spots. This is why, in every dialogue, Socrates shows that in the end we always speak more about ourselves than about the ostensible subject, a realization that proves painful and destabilizing, wounding our pride. A realization that can, indeed, justify the accusation of domination and violence against Socrates.

## IRONY

One of the criticisms leveled against Socrates was that his modesty was feigned, as indicated by the concept of irony, which originally designates the attitude of one who pretends not to know or not to understand something while in fact being aware of the truth or of reality. Irony can be regarded as a rhetorical technique, a tool of manipulation. It is used to convey a meaning by expressing something in a way opposite to, or very different from, its literal or expected sense, which implies a contrast between appearances and reality, between what is said and what is meant, generally in order to provoke

reflection, to highlight a person's contradictions, or to emphasize a particular point. Socrates pretends ignorance in order to prompt his interlocutor to disclose himself, to expose his certainties, since the latter has nothing to fear from someone so apparently "naïve." Thus Socrates advances masked, and the interlocutor, deceived, soon finds himself faced with relentless questioning, thereby trapped in his own assertions. For example, in the *Euthyphro*, Socrates crudely pretends to admire his interlocutor's wisdom in order to demolish his definition of piety. The reader of course understands that Euthyphro's real trap is his "good conscience," his egotism, of which Socrates takes full advantage. This mise en scène, described with literary flair by Plato, shows the reader how deeply we are victims of ourselves, through a sort of chronic narcissism of the human being, constantly seeking confirmation and recognition, fearing the "light" of truth directed at ourselves and our opinions.

Even if Socratic irony is well intentioned, inviting us at once to laugh and to become aware of our faults, it can nevertheless be seen as a form of violence. Already irony is troubling, for it produces cognitive dissonance in the interlocutor, and in this sense it is disturbing. We understand what is said, but what we understand seems strange, offends the common sense that usually serves as our rational reference, and we no longer know what to think. We wonder what the "true meaning" of the statement is, and we question the speaker's intention. Irony creates a communicative uncertainty that can be destabilizing, an ambiguity akin to trauma, like the double binds identified in psychology.

Irony hides its true intention behind an apparently innocent discourse. This masked form of communication can be experienced as an indirect aggression, difficult to counter. And since human beings are often anxious, we worry about

the “reality” of the message. Faced with suspected irony, if indeed the interlocutor even perceives it, he asks himself all sorts of questions that may prove troubling, especially if the remark concerns him closely. What is the real intention behind this statement? Is it serious or not? Should it be taken literally or figuratively? Is it sincere, or is there a hidden purpose? Is it a favorable or unfavorable remark? All kinds of doubts arise that disturb and destabilize.

As a result, an imbalance of power occurs, for irony naturally establishes a hierarchy between the one who wields it and his target. Not understanding irony can mark someone as being outside the group, creating a form of social ostracism. The ironist places himself in a position of intellectual superiority, he becomes the authority, creating an unequal relation of force in the exchange. Often in a group, irony produces two audiences: those who grasp the second meaning and those who do not, a division that can publicly humiliate the person targeted, inasmuch as he feels stupid for not truly “getting” what is said. Moreover, for psychological reasons, due to lack of distance, the person targeted by irony finds it harder to understand than the observers, or at the very least is more affected by the sense of doubt. And if he wishes to respond, the ironist can always retract by claiming he was misunderstood: “I was joking,” he might retort. This possibility of escape, this denial of responsibility, adds a manipulative dimension to the affair. The person targeted by irony finds himself in an impossible position, relatively powerless, for to respond seriously makes him seem naïve, while to remain silent appears to validate the criticism. Socratic irony in particular aims to deconstruct the certainties and convictions at the core of the interlocutor’s identity, which can be experienced as humiliating. It often operates by mockery or derision, forms of symbolic violence that may have a real emotional impact despite their playful character. And irony is a powerful rhetorical form, granting the speaker discursive

domination. For example, it can serve to close a debate without responding to the arguments raised, thus imposing a refusal to engage that denies the interlocutor's legitimacy to pursue the exchange. These potentially violent dimensions of irony explain why, even though it is often considered a sophisticated form of wit, it can also be felt as a subtle, and at times profoundly wounding, aggression.

A clarification must be made here. Socratic irony goes far beyond a simple rhetorical figure, becoming a genuine existential and philosophical posture, something often misunderstood. Later thinkers such as Kierkegaard developed the concept of "ironic consciousness," a philosophical notion designating a particular relation to oneself and to the world, characterized by a critical and reflective distance. At the heart of this notion lies the ability to perceive oneself simultaneously as subject and object, thereby creating a distance from one's own beliefs, certainties, and behaviors. This double consciousness opens a space of intellectual freedom in which the individual can examine his own contradictions and detach himself from social conventions or established truths. The French philosopher Jankélévitch wrote: "*Such does ironic consciousness appear to us: it is impossible with it to form habits, to circumscribe it once and for all within a concept; it keeps us supple and always on the alert; it wakes us at dawn to roam the countryside and it mocks its own adherents."* It stimulates recognition of the limits of our knowledge, the capacity to sustain contradictory perspectives without resolving them immediately, a creative tension between engagement and detachment, and lucidity in the face of the potential absurdity of the human condition. Ironic consciousness differs from simple rhetorical irony in that it constitutes a deeper existential posture. It makes it possible to avoid both rigid dogmatism and absolute relativism, maintaining a productive tension between affirmation

and questioning. In our contemporary world, ironic consciousness may be seen as a philosophical response to shaken certainties and discredited grand narratives, offering a middle path between nihilism and naïveté, between knowing and not-knowing, between certainty and questioning. Thus Socrates, in his relation to himself, constantly maintained a reflective distance that allowed him to examine his own opinions and to subject them to the same critical scrutiny he applied to others, an attitude of humility entirely at odds with the image of a domineering, arrogant Socrates.

Fundamentally, the ironist challenges us, intellectually and psychologically. And any challenge, depending on how we take it, disturbs us and may cause pain. That is indeed one of Socrates' functions: to make us step outside ourselves, to confront the challenges of spirit and existence, in short, to awaken us. This is what the ironic discourse achieves, when we find ourselves wondering how to take things. But we may also wonder by what right the ironist imposes upon us a dilemma we did not ask for, unless this dilemma amuses us, in which case we take it as a gift to our intelligence. The play between habitual ways of thinking and the strange discourse, the tension between what is expected and unexpected, between what we understand and do not understand, may be perceived either as a violence or as a delight. Doubt, by creating perplexity, may stimulate us intellectually or cause us suffering. In reality, it is a choice each of us must make. For the ironist does indeed play with us, showing little respect for social codes or for our image. And irony can also be abused, when it becomes systematic. Then it becomes a way of refusing dialogue, a permanent denial of engagement, a contemptuous ignoring of the other. Irony can easily slide into sarcasm. The two are often confused, since the distinction is not always obvious, and it seems useful here to attempt a distinction through a few

simple criteria which, though not offering absolute markers, at least provide some avenues of reflection.

Irony is light, sarcasm is heavy. Irony invites reflection, sarcasm seeks to punish. Irony is an invitation, sarcasm is a condemnation. Irony is joyful, sarcasm is bitter. Irony is flexible, sarcasm is rigid. Irony is sharing, sarcasm is egocentric. Irony is gratuitous, sarcasm is frustrated. Irony is effective, sarcasm is powerless. Irony is open, sarcasm is resentful. Irony is playful, sarcasm is sullen. Irony is generous, sarcasm is grasping. Irony is naïve, sarcasm is pretentious. Irony is subtle, sarcasm is coarse. Thus sarcasm is in essence a violence, whereas irony is violent only circumstantially, depending on the interpretation accorded to it by the interlocutor, according to his intellectual and psychological disposition.

Faced with Socrates' irony, an important strategy for him, yet one that could be perceived very negatively, we may ask whether he should be taken seriously or not, whether he is mocking us or not. Not taking him seriously would mean refusing to attach importance or credibility to his action or discourse, considering them unworthy of serious attention, and regarding him as untrustworthy. Taking him seriously, by contrast, would mean regarding him attentively and respectfully, firmly believing in his sincerity or in the value of his words. And not taking him too seriously would mean not exaggerating the importance accorded to his acts and words, without rejecting them altogether, suggesting instead the maintenance of a certain critical distance, a refusal to be overly impressed.

The question of whether Socrates should be taken seriously is an interesting one, for it raises the problem of how to relate to his philosophical method and his paradoxical stance. Let us propose the idea that his quest for truth was

genuine. He questioned people in order to expose contradictions in their beliefs and to make them reflect. The same holds for his moral commitment: he preferred to die rather than renounce his philosophical mission. Plato, Xenophon, and many others took him very seriously, seriously enough to make of him the father of Western philosophy. But he also played with irony. He often pretended ignorance, which could give the impression that he did not take himself seriously. His questions sometimes seemed naïve or playful, aimed simply at unsettling his interlocutors' certainties with provocations, much like the sophists he ridiculed. And his humility could appear excessive, when he refused the title of "sage" and presented himself as merely a seeker, which confounded expectations. He claimed to know nothing, he flattered his interlocutors, he asked simple questions, yet behind it all was a subtle and powerful method. Some Athenians must have perceived Socrates as a jester or an agitator, even if that appearance concealed a real seriousness. His aim was not to mock gratuitously, but to bring awareness of the limits of knowledge. His humor was a philosophical weapon, not an end in itself.

We may conclude by affirming that Socrates did wish to be taken seriously in his project, to awaken consciences, but not in his posture, for he rejected dogmatic authority and certainties. To take Socrates too seriously would be to forget his irony, which served to keep minds alert by maintaining a certain ambiguity. Not to take him seriously would be to miss his fertile radicality and to ignore the challenge he offers us. Socratic irony is not a mask of emptiness, but a strategy of emptiness: by pretending not to know, he forces others to think. To take him seriously is to accept that he never answers in our place. Not to take him seriously is to risk neglecting what is deepest in him: the demand for intellectual quest, for confrontation with oneself.

And we can observe that Socrates periodically oscillates between the two registers, playful and serious, even if both carry significance. A good example appears in *Phaedrus*, during a dialogue that revolves around the question of love. In a first speech, Socrates ironically maintains that the lover is a passionate being, and therefore irrational, jealous, possessive, and unstable. Such passion, he argues, is undesirable, for it leads to suffering, to chaos, to the loss of self. Then he is interrupted by his *daimonion* and decides to correct himself. He confesses that he has been impious, that he has lied about Eros, and that he must make amends. He then criticizes Lysias, who had just delivered a speech defending a relationship without passion, based only on calculation, prudence, and interest, an attitude he judged mediocre. Socrates then explains that passion is in fact an indispensable trial that can elevate the soul if one controls its course. For true, divine love, he claims, renders the soul alive, awakened, inspired.

Socratic irony is not a simple, contemptuous mockery. It is a strategy: by pretending to be humble, ignorant, or admiring, Socrates pushes his interlocutor to speak, to reveal himself, to betray himself. It is a way of awakening thought without imposing a ready-made truth. But this perpetual provocation can also be disorienting. It declares “I know nothing,” even as he seems to know much; it says “Listen to me,” without ever giving a direct answer. Thus, to take him seriously is to recognize that he takes us seriously ourselves: he invites us to seek truth, not to receive it. Not to take him seriously is to risk missing what is most precious in him: his trust in our capacity to think for ourselves. To take Socrates seriously is not to believe that he holds the truth, but to accept that he sets us on the path. His irony is not an escape, a withdrawal, or a rejection of his interlocutors, but an invitation to think for oneself.

## CONTROL

One may nevertheless conclude that in Socrates this displayed “ignorance” served to mask his control, his seizure of power. He claimed to know nothing and therefore to teach nothing, but in reality he most often chose the themes, such as justice, courage, or love, he determined what was to be discussed, he defined the very rules of the discussion, such as the refusal of long speeches, the requirement of short answers and clear definitions, and he concluded from a position of strength even when the dialogue did not reach an outcome, for he forced his interlocutors to recognize the limits of their knowledge. He often emerged victorious, even in the absence of a formal conclusion, even when his interlocutors grew angry, for he had planted doubt and uncertainty. Thus, if the sophists sought to please the public, one may accuse Socrates of seeking to dominate his interlocutor intellectually, without compromise. Certainly some interlocutors resist, such as Callicles in the *Gorgias*, though they generally end up exhausted. Socrates succeeds in intellectually wearing out his “partners,” pushing them to their limits, even when they vigorously oppose his ideas. The strength of the Socratic method lies in its capacity to bring to light the internal contradictions within the beliefs of others, until those contradictions become too evident to ignore, even for the most resistant.

More rarely, in Plato’s dialogues, Socrates is in a position of weakness, becoming a pupil, as in *The Symposium*, where the priestess Diotima teaches him the nature of love. Without criticizing Socrates directly, she nonetheless makes it clear that for him the ascent toward a true understanding of love will be demanding and difficult. She makes him understand that the quest for truth

about love, the gradual elevation from carnal love to the love of absolute beauty, implies a difficult path of learning and purification. Diotima acts as a patient but firm guide, pointing out to Socrates his present limits in comprehension, without adopting an explicitly critical tone. She simply insists on the idea that access to a higher understanding requires effort, humility, and personal transformation, implying that Socrates, despite his recognized wisdom, still has progress to make. Thus she teaches him with gentleness but with clarity that this spiritual ascent is neither easy nor immediate, even for him, “the wisest of men,” according to the oracle of Delphi.

It should be noted in this passage that Diotima’s gentleness stands in contrast to the harshness of the Socratic dialogue. Whereas Socrates generally shows himself incisive, ironic, and at times even severe in his method of questioning, Diotima prefers a pedagogy that is patient and understanding. Rather than destabilizing her interlocutor in order to reveal his contradictions, she gently guides Socrates through a progressive reflection founded on exchange and gradual clarification. This contrast is remarkable, for it shows that access to higher truth does not necessarily require direct confrontation, but may also come through benevolent guidance, capable of encouraging and accompanying rather than destabilizing. Diotima thus illustrates that humility and the recognition of one’s limits are essential prerequisites to any spiritual progress, even for a mind as discerning as that of Socrates. This passage marks an interesting moment in the Platonic dialogues, insofar as, in a rare instance, it takes Socrates by surprise.

# UGLINESS

Strangely, another aspect of Socratic “violence” is the physical ugliness of the man, which became as legendary as his condemnation and death. His appearance is described as “grotesque” by Plato and Xenophon, nonetheless his loyal disciples, as well as by later testimonies such as that of the ancient Greek historian Diogenes Laertius. This ugliness contrasts sharply with the aesthetic canons of his time, in which physical beauty was perceived as a visible manifestation of virtue and harmony.

Socrates apparently had a flat or snub nose, broad and crushed, which gave him a rustic and disharmonious appearance. Alcibiades, though in love with him, compared his face to that of a Silenus, a mythological creature half-human, half-animal, known both for its comic and misshapen form and for its association with hidden wisdom, a symbol of the contradiction between outward appearance and inner richness. His eyes are described as bulging or protruding, almost goggling, which added to his strange and unsettling aspect. Yet this feature reinforced the idea that he had a penetrating gaze, capable of scrutinizing the depths of the soul. His mouth was wide and fleshy, disproportionate. His build was ungainly. Socrates was rather modest in stature, short and stocky, with a robust, muscular frame inherited from his years of military service. His physique was not that of a graceful athlete but more that of a “solid” man, even massive, like a peasant. He is often described as somewhat pot-bellied, which clashed with the Greek ideal of the athletic, slender body. His legs were judged too short in proportion to the rest of his body, accentuating his awkward, ungainly appearance. Moreover, he often wore old, simple clothes and seemed indifferent to the conventions of dress. He frequently walked barefoot, even in circumstances where this could appear

incongruous, for instance, in battle or in daily life in Athens, a habit reflecting his ascetic, minimalist way of life, which stood in stark contrast to the norms of his time, where physical appearance was closely tied to virtue and social status. For him this meant simplicity, detachment, and freedom.

His overall appearance, rustic and neglected, made him a burlesque, even coarse figure in the context of Athenian society, where dress and social codes were important. Yet this general appearance, almost repellent to those who met him, reinforced his image as an ascetic philosopher, unconcerned with outward appearance. Moreover, according to some testimonies, Socrates sometimes played with his own ugliness, adopting exaggerated postures or expressions to shock or amuse his interlocutors, adding a comic dimension to an already singular appearance.

Thus his ugliness and lack of concern with grooming can be considered a form of symbolic violence characteristic of his very person. In classical Greek culture, physical beauty (*kalos*) was intimately linked to moral and intellectual virtue. The ideal of *kalokagathia* ("beautiful and good") in theory reflected harmony between external appearance and inner qualities. This idea permeated art, philosophy, and even daily life: a well-proportioned body symbolized balance, discipline, and excellence. Socrates' physical ugliness, however, stood in radical contrast to this ideal. In this sense, it can be seen as a symbolic provocation, a deliberate rupture with cultural norms, for it called into question the fundamental values of Greek society. But Socrates himself seemed not to regard his ugliness as a handicap, but rather as a pedagogical tool. According to some accounts, he used his physical appearance to emphasize that the value of a man lies in his soul and not in his exterior or in the materiality of the body, in line with his philosophical doctrine, which rejected appearances in favor of the

essence of being. The metaphor of the Silenus illustrates how Socrates' ugliness concealed an intellectual and spiritual depth inaccessible to those who judged merely by appearances. Thus this inversion of values, ugliness associated with wisdom, constitutes an implicit critique of a culture that excessively valorized physical beauty. Socrates is therefore a manifest paradox, pleasing to the mind as he was displeasing to the eye, a living contradiction that contributed to his work and to the almost hypnotic effect he had on others. This reinforced in his interlocutors the sense of an opposition between being and appearance, between soul and body, which lies at the heart of the Socratic approach.

Through his ugliness and his disregard for adornment, he displayed an aspect of himself that everyone else tried to conceal, or at least to soften. He, without complexes, exposed himself; he felt no shame, for he knew that beauty lay elsewhere. According to prevailing codes, one should rather hide external ugliness behind a fine appearance, even while indulging in baseness within. By contrast, Socrates' ugliness became a philosophical weapon, a way of shaking his contemporaries' prejudices. This subversion of aesthetic norms may be seen as a form of symbolic violence, for it forced the Greeks to reconsider their deeply rooted beliefs about beauty and morality. All the more so since his physical ugliness, combined with his ascetic lifestyle and provocative methods, made him a disturbing figure. By embodying an anti-ideal, Socrates highlighted the contradictions of Athenian society: why venerate physical beauty if it guarantees neither virtue nor wisdom? For some Athenians, this provocation could be felt as an attack on their cultural identity. Indeed, to accept Socrates was to admit that traditional criteria of beauty and excellence were insufficient, even deceptive. This tension culminated in Socrates' trial, where he was accused of corrupting the youth and turning citizens away from the traditional

gods. His physical ugliness could be interpreted as a symbol of this rupture with established norms.

Admittedly, if Socrates' ugliness can be seen as symbolic violence, it may also be viewed from another angle: as intellectual liberation. By challenging aesthetic standards, Socrates opened the way to deeper reflection on what truly matters in human life. His physical ugliness thus becomes a metaphor, inviting us to transcend superficial appearances in search of truth and virtue. A liberation that is not without pain, for it compels individuals to abandon comfortable certainties, which can be experienced as a form of psychological or symbolic violence. Yet this violence is not gratuitous: it serves a pedagogical and philosophical purpose, inviting the Greeks to rethink their priorities and to value intelligence, wisdom, and virtue beyond physical appearances. Socrates' ugliness is thus not merely a physical trait but a powerful instrument of social and intellectual critique. It embodies a tension between the established order and the quest for truth, making Socrates as unsettling as he was fascinating, a figure truly unique in the history of thought.

In Plato's thought, as pupil and promoter of Socrates, this tension between appearances and essence is central. He distinguishes two levels of reality: the sensible world, where deceptive appearances dominate and where all is changing and imperfect; and the intelligible world, where dwell the eternal Ideas or Forms, which constitute the true essence of things. Socrates' physical ugliness can be seen as a symbol of the sensible world, marked by imperfection and transience. Yet Socrates, as a philosopher, embodied the capacity to transcend this world in order to attain the eternal truths of the intelligible world. In this sense, his ugliness becomes an invitation to reject the illusions of sensible appearances in order to focus on the essence of being, which resides

in the soul and in knowledge. This perspective reinforces the idea that the "violence" of Socrates' ugliness is a constructive violence, intended to free the mind from false appearances. It may thus be likened to a "meditative" practice, compelling us to look beyond visible forms toward the "light," to emerge from the "cave" of shadows. Socrates, as a provocative figure, forces us to question immediate certainties in order to reach a deeper, hidden understanding of being and truth. Rejecting appearances in favor of essence entails a kind of violence, for it requires renouncing familiar values and comfortable certainties. This violence can be understood as an initiatory passage, necessary for attaining a deeper understanding of reality. In the case of Socrates, his physical ugliness acts as an "initiation" for his contemporaries: it forces them to abandon their attachment to traditional aesthetic ideals in order to seek a higher truth. This violence is not destructive but purifying. It allows the spirit to be freed from the illusions of the sensible world and to turn toward being. In this sense, Socrates' ugliness is not merely a physical feature but a powerful philosophical symbol, illustrating the necessity of going beyond appearances to reach truth. His ugliness is thus not really a disadvantage, but a philosophical tool, a way of provoking and unsettling those who judge too quickly by appearances. In the end, Socrates' ugliness is less a weakness than a strength, for it incarnates the tension between superficial appearance and the deeper essence of the human being.

## HUMILITY

There are also moments when Socrates places himself in a position of weakness, of vulnerability, of humility, though here again one may see irony,

an irony of situation rather than of discourse. For it is a strategic device, whose unfolding and outcome are somewhat predictable. This occurs when Socrates proposes to the sophists, reluctant to answer his questions, that they question him in turn, submitting himself to their inquiry and thus inviting them to engage in genuine dialectical reflection, in genuine dialogue. Obviously this does not work as "planned," or rather the result is entirely predictable.

First, because the sophists, such as Gorgias or Callicles, are above all teachers of rhetoric, more interested in the art of persuasion than in any authentic search for truth. Their objective is not to reach a profound understanding of concepts, but rather to win arguments, to prove that their position is the most convincing, regardless of its logical or moral validity. When Socrates proposes to a sophist that he questions him, his aim is to test the coherence of the sophist's ideas and to subject them to critical scrutiny. Yet these sophists, being more interested in rhetorical flourish than in truth, are not truly open to being questioned in any depth. On the contrary, their strategy often consists in manipulating words or in evading the deeper questions that would place them in difficulty.

Thus the sophists do not share the same conception of dialectic as Socrates. The Socratic dialectic is a rigorous and systematic process in which participants must not only propose ideas but also submit them to severe and honest critique with the aim of reaching a common truth. The sophists, however, are more inclined to use dialectic as a tool of manipulation rather than as a means of arriving at truth. By suggesting that the sophists question him, Socrates seeks to lead them into authentic reflection, but this fails, for the sophists seek more to win the debate than to understand ideas more profoundly.

Consequently, even when they take the role of questioner, their questioning remains superficial or tactical, aimed at maintaining their position and convincing others. They do not pose “real” questions, for they are not genuinely interested in the thought of others or in seeking truth together, since they already believe they possess it. Moreover, when the sophists attempt to question Socrates, they lack true philosophical foundations on which to build a genuine exchange of reflection; they do not master the tools of reason. Their lack of theoretical depth prevents them from conducting a true intellectual conversation. This explains why, though invited to question Socrates, the exercise never leads to genuine constructive dialogue. But of course Socrates, as well as the attentive reader, expected this, and so it is not really a matter of Socrates placing himself in the position of pupil.

## STRATEGY

One may therefore wonder about violence and the exercise of power in the Socratic approach. This question raises interesting issues around the concept of symbolic violence or manipulation inherent in the very nature of the Socratic method. As we have seen, Socrates often presents himself as ignorant and adopts a “humble” posture in his dialogues. However, this “modesty,” despite a certain psychological reality in him, a certain awareness of his own limits, often remains a strategic attitude. It serves to disarm his interlocutors, to lead them to reveal their own contradictions. In this way, he exercises subtle control over the conversation, guiding his interlocutors toward conclusions they might not have reached without his influence. It is thus a way of indirectly manipulating others, which could lead some to see in it a form of violence, exercised through

psychological or intellectual domination. For the aim is to push interlocutors into their last defenses, by exposing their ignorance or contradictions, which can be embarrassing, humiliating, or even destructive for the individual's identity. Socrates reduced his interlocutors to impotence by exposing their contradictions; he mocked them through the corrosive irony of his factitious praise, showing a total lack of "respect" for the person. In a Greek culture where reputation was crucial, being ridiculed by Socrates amounted to an unacceptable humiliation. Thus, in the *Gorgias*, Callicles ends up exploding with anger, accusing Socrates of "trampling on decency."

In the *Apology*, some of Socrates' critics claim that he "demoralizes" the young Athenians through this strategy. Therefore, if one defines violence as any act that imposes domination or causes psychological harm, then the Socratic method could be seen as violent, even though it is implicit and not intentional. The methodological control imposed by Socrates can be perceived as a form of asymmetrical intellectual power, where Socrates holds a superior moral and rational position. If this domination is felt as coercive or imposed, as some perceive it, it may be viewed as symbolic violence. One may even accuse him of "stupefying" his interlocutor, as it is said by comparing the effect of dialogue with him to the impact of the torpedo fish. This fish, a kind of ray, is known for its ability to produce powerful electric discharges that have an immediate physical and paralyzing effect on its prey or aggressors, for the pain of the shock generates sensory and mental confusion. In the same way, Socrates paralyzes his interlocutor by leading him to acknowledge his ignorance, leaving him often disconcerted and helpless in the face of his own contradictions. He plunges the interlocutor into a fleeting confusion, like the torpedo fish with its prey, for he compels him to lose his intellectual illusions, often leaving him more perplexed than before their exchange, which may create the temporary

impression of being dulled or diminished. The Socratic method, although intended to awaken critical thinking, may be perceived as “stupefying” when it leaves the interlocutor without a clear response, stunned by the exposure of his own shortcomings. The shock produced by the Socratic dialogue is comparable to the impact of the torpedo fish: it disorients the interlocutor, rendering him unable to find his usual bearings, even if this effect remains temporary. This analogy illustrates how Socrates temporarily neutralizes his interlocutor, not out of malice, but to force him out of his intellectual comfort zone. This insistence on deconstructing the beliefs of his interlocutors thus produces a sense of intellectual alienation, symbolized by the image of the torpedo fish. It highlights the paradoxical character of the Socratic method, which seeks to enlighten by disturbing.

Admittedly, one may attest that Socrates does not consciously seek to harm or dominate his interlocutors, for his aim is pedagogical and philosophical. He seeks to help others discover the truth by themselves, by questioning their presuppositions. The violence perceived would then be involuntary, resulting more from the emotional or psychological impact of confronting ignorance than from a will to harm. In this sense, one might refuse the term violence in its moral or ethical meaning, attesting instead that it is a necessary tension, a salutary shock, inherent to the pursuit of knowledge, to the practice of reason.

One may nevertheless wonder whether everyone is able to receive this “salutary shock.” It may be beneficial for a minority of people who do not need certainties to reassure themselves, who appreciate quest, questioning, and inquiry, and who have sufficient self-confidence not to falter. But for some, this confidence is not a given; they are fragile, even if one may attest that this confidence can indeed be acquired through the practice of questioning. Others

need faith, beliefs that provide bearings, frameworks, established truths , hence the success of religions. Socrates offers nothing of the sort, no support, no “solution,” which may itself constitute a kind of violence. Unless the exercise of reason itself provides this framework, this may seem rather dry and devoid of affective ties. Religion, for example, or shared belief, offers instead this form of communion, of bond and of affects, at the risk of truth and lucidity. Admittedly, the Socratic dialogue is a provocation to awakening. But this awakening can be experienced as a trauma if one does not understand its meaning, or if it exceeds one’s emotional capacities.

Let us nevertheless attempt to defend the idea that the Socratic dialogue, or the confrontation with common reason, is beneficial for all, even when it collides with our psychological limits. The Socratic dialogue, like common reason, also aims to approach a shared truth. Although it may seem harsh at the time, this collective quest for truth is no doubt beneficial to all. First, it liberates from illusion, for unexamined beliefs or dogmatic opinions can trap a person in limited patterns of thought. Confrontation with reason or critical questioning makes it possible to break these intellectual chains. And it fosters autonomy, for in learning to question one’s own certainties, a person becomes more autonomous in their thinking. They are no longer simply dependent on dominant opinions or social prejudices, which remain nonetheless a form of alienation. Even if it seems difficult, this effort to reach a more fundamental truth is a progress for both the individual and society. Confrontation with opposing ideas or internal contradictions may provoke cognitive dissonance. However, this tension is necessary for personal and intellectual development, as a stage of transformation. Life itself often compels us to revise our assumptions, sometimes harshly. These moments of rupture are opportunities to re-evaluate our beliefs and evolve. It strengthens

intellectual resilience, for accepting to be challenged by a new or contradictory idea helps to develop a more flexible and nuanced thought. In this sense, the “salutary shock” of the Socratic dialogue can be seen as a form of mental hygiene, a way of keeping the mind alert.

Although some may perceive common sense or logic as restrictive or burdensome, they play an essential role of regulation in human thought. Common sense functions like morality: it serves to regulate our actions and our thoughts. This regulation is beneficial, for it protects us from the excesses of our subjectivity. Without doubt and questioning, individuals risk falling into subjective aberrations or totalizing illusions , for example, the uncertainty of radical relativism or the anxiety of victimhood. Common sense makes it possible to establish shared foundations for dialogue. Without it, any discussion would become absurd or sterile. Even if it may seem frustrating for those who value originality or singularity, this framework is not a limitation but a necessary condition for constructive thinking.

The Socratic dialogue invites us to cultivate a form of intellectual humility, which consists in recognizing our own limits and accepting that we may be mistaken. This is beneficial for protecting us from intellectual arrogance, from an undue feeling of “knowing.” Humility is not a weakness, but a strength that enables progress. Rather than claiming to hold absolute truth, the Socratic dialogue invites collaboration with others in order to build a shared understanding. This humility is particularly important in a world where personal certainties can easily become rigid dogmas. Even if we note today an excess of superficial rhetorical precautions such as “I do not claim to have the absolute truth but…,” “In all humility I would say that…,” “This is only my humble

opinion…," or again "Tell me if I am wrong, but…," so many formulations that both tend to clutter a clear and bold thought, and conceal a certain dogmatism.

Over time, individuals may eventually overcome their initial irritation at the Socratic method, for several reasons. First, they begin to recognize that the discomfort is not an attack on their person, but rather an invitation to engage in deeper thought. The Socratic questioning challenges their presuppositions and compels them to consider other perspectives, which, although destabilizing at first, can lead to greater self-awareness and intellectual growth. By enduring this discomfort, they may realize that the process is valuable, for it incites them to question their beliefs and refine their thinking. Secondly, individuals may come to appreciate the clarity that emerges from this type of interrogation. Although the questions may seem intrusive or irritating at first, they ultimately help them to arrive at more coherent and well-founded conclusions. The capacity to think critically, developed through this method, becomes a factor of empowerment, and they may begin to see the advantages of confronting their own uncertainties rather than avoiding them. Finally, Socratic questioning often leads to a sense of intellectual humility. When one is asked to defend one's beliefs, one may recognize gaps in one's understanding or areas where one had accepted ideas uncritically. This awareness can foster a greater appreciation of the process, for it cultivates a more reflective and open approach to learning. Thus, although initial irritation is natural, it is sometimes replaced by a sense of personal and intellectual growth once the value of questioning is understood.

Here are some examples drawn from Plato's dialogues, where Socrates' interlocutors, initially irritated or disconcerted by his interrogative method, eventually come to experience a sense of personal or intellectual growth.

These “conversions” illustrate how Socratic practice, although uncomfortable at first, can lead to a positive transformation.

In these dialogues of Plato, several characters undergo a clearly positive transformation following their interaction with Socrates. These transformations are manifested by awareness, increased intellectual humility, or openness to continue philosophical inquiry. Here are some examples of such transformations.

In *Phaedrus*, Phaedrus, an impressionable young man, admires the sophistic speeches on love and rhetoric. He shares with Socrates a eulogy of love written by the sophist Lysias, which glorifies non-passionate love. Under Socrates’ influence, Phaedrus begins to question the superficiality of sophistic speeches. Although Socrates does not subject Phaedrus to as systematic an interrogation as in other dialogues, such as the *Meno* or the *Euthyphro*, he uses his usual method of questioning to guide Phaedrus toward deeper reflection. Socrates makes him understand that true rhetoric must be founded on knowledge and truth, and that true love, inspired by divine beauty, is superior to interested love. Phaedrus ends up accepting that sophistic speeches lack depth and that philosophy offers a richer and more authentic understanding of love and rhetoric. He seems to have gained a deeper appreciation of love and rhetoric, as well as a better understanding of the value of philosophical reflection. In the *Crito*, Crito, a faithful friend of Socrates, tries to persuade him to flee Athens to avoid his execution. He argues that to stay and die would be unjust toward his friends and family. Through the dialogue, Socrates helps Crito to understand that respecting the laws of the city is a moral obligation, even if those laws seem unjust. Crito shifts from a pragmatic position , to save Socrates at all costs , to a deeper understanding of justice and civic duty. He ends up accepting that Socrates’ decision to stay and die is morally correct, for

it respects the principles of justice and integrity. Although Crito does not become a philosopher, his transformation shows that he has integrated a higher moral perspective thanks to Socrates' reasoning.

In *Euthydemus*, two sophists, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, boast of their mastery of rhetoric and their ability to teach virtue. They initially impress their listeners with their ingenious arguments. Under Socrates' insistent questioning, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus are gradually destabilized. Their claims to wisdom and moral expertise are revealed as hollow and contradictory. Although they do not reach a clear conclusion, they show signs of intellectual humility by implicitly acknowledging that their sophistic rhetoric is not true wisdom. The dialogue suggests that this confrontation with Socrates might incite them to reflect further on the nature of virtue and knowledge.

In the *Greater Hippias*, Hippias, a sophist famous for his versatility and encyclopedic knowledge, claims to be able easily to define concepts such as beauty. Under Socrates' questioning, Hippias realizes that his simplistic definitions are insufficient and full of contradictions. Although he resists certain criticisms, he shows signs of doubt about the solidity of his own knowledge. Hippias ends up admitting that he cannot provide a satisfactory definition of beauty, which constitutes a step toward intellectual humility. Although Hippias does not completely renounce his sophistic pretensions, he seems to have gained a better understanding of the limits of his knowledge.

In the *Meno*, Meno, an arrogant young nobleman, begins by being frustrated by Socrates' incessant questions about virtue. He accuses Socrates of being like a gadfly that stings without providing clear answers. As the dialogue progresses, Meno is led to acknowledge his ignorance about what virtue truly is. He even participates in a philosophical experiment: the interrogation of a slave to solve a mathematical problem, which makes him understand that

learning is possible through the principle of “reminiscence,” even among people of low extraction , which, for Meno, is a true lesson. Although he does not succeed in fully defining virtue, Meno seems to have gained intellectual humility and a deeper understanding of the process of learning.
In *Theaetetus*, Socrates engages in dialogue with the young Theaetetus about the nature of knowledge. Theaetetus, full of good will but inexperienced, proposes several definitions of knowledge, all invalidated by Socrates. Although Theaetetus does not succeed in defining knowledge clearly, he expresses a feeling of relief and satisfaction at the end of the dialogue, for he acknowledges that this exploration has helped him to better understand his own intellectual limits. Theaetetus leaves the dialogue not with a definitive answer, but with a more humble and open philosophical attitude, ready to pursue the search for truth.
Let us also take Callicles, in the *Gorgias*, a paradoxical example of inner transformation, rather realistic. He is a proud sophist and defends a cynical and selfish vision of justice, according to which the strong must dominate the weak. He criticizes Socrates for his moral idealism. During the dialogue, he explicitly becomes angry; his outburst is one of the most famous reactions to the Socratic method described by Plato. He calls Socrates a chatterer and a demagogue, he mocks his obsession with philosophy. He threatens to leave the discussion, saying “I don’t know where you are going with this!” and ends up abandoning the debate, a sign of extreme frustration. Nevertheless, trapped in his contradictions, he admits that certain pleasures are bad, thereby ruining his defense of radical hedonism. Callicles’ fury contrasts moreover with Socrates’ calm, underscoring philosophical superiority over rhetorical violence.

Callicles understands something, but this understanding is ambivalent and painful, which partly explains his anger. He perceives that Socrates

deconstructs his ethic of the right of the strongest by revealing its internal contradictions. He realizes that his position is untenable in reason, but he refuses to admit it. His final silence shows that he has perceived his impasse, but prefers to flee rather than renounce his beliefs, like a chess player who resigns when he clearly foresees checkmate. His arrogance conceals a fear: that of being reduced to the equal of the "weak" whom he despises. He embodies the man who glimpses the truth but rejects it out of pride. Plato presents him as an anti-hero of reason. His rage reveals that the defenders of power brutalize because they sense their fragility. In fact, he "understands" that Socrates is right, but chooses anger rather than self-questioning. He understands enough to be destabilized, but not enough to be transformed. It is this half-consciousness that makes him so human and so dramatic. Callicles is a sort of broken mirror of this truth.

In the *Protagoras*, Protagoras, a famous sophist, agrees to discuss with Socrates the question of whether virtue can be taught. At first, Protagoras is confident in his rhetorical abilities and seems amused by Socrates' questions. However, over the course of the dialogue, he finds himself caught in a series of logical contradictions. In the end, he implicitly admits that his initial claims lack coherence and acknowledges the complexity of the subject. Although Protagoras does not entirely renounce his sophistic beliefs, he shows signs of openness to philosophical rigor and to deeper reflection.

These examples show that Socrates often has a positive impact on his interlocutors, even when they do not immediately succeed in resolving the philosophical problems raised. His practice can provoke initial irritation or rejection in interlocutors, but also lead to a form of intellectual or moral growth. This "conversion" is not "miraculous," it is not always complete or

explicit, but it manifests itself in the recognition of ignorance and contradictions, an openness to critical reflection, or an evolution in the way of thinking. It encourages the adoption of a more humble and reflective attitude, to open the mind to new and deeper perspectives. Although not all transformations are immediate or total, they illustrate the potential of Socratic practice to inspire intellectual and moral growth in those exposed to it, and it is never without effect.

However, some people may remain resentful after having experienced the Socratic questioning, perceiving this experience as violent. This occurs for several reasons, mainly related to their emotional and psychological reactions. First, Socratic questioning can be perceived as a threat to a person's identity, especially when it exposes gaps in their knowledge or challenges deeply rooted beliefs. For some, being forced to confront their lack of understanding or clarity can seem humiliating, generating resentment rather than reflection. The feeling of having been "caught out" can trigger defensiveness or hostility, especially if the person is not ready to acknowledge their own limits. Secondly, when Socratic questioning forces a person to confront contradictions or inconsistencies in their thinking, it creates cognitive dissonance. This discomfort arises when their beliefs clash with the logic of questioning. While some may overcome this dissonance to reach a finer understanding, others may resist changing their beliefs and instead feel anger or frustration. This emotional resistance manifests as resentment toward the process or toward the person posing the questions. Thirdly, some people may consider the Socratic questioning as a form of manipulation, feeling that they are being pushed to admit something they do not want, or that they are being led to a position they do not support. This perception of being "used" or "forced" toward an unwelcome conclusion can provoke a sense of betrayal, especially if

the questioning seems too aggressive or relentless. Fourthly, Socratic questioning often requires one to be open and vulnerable with regard to one's thoughts and beliefs. For those unaccustomed to this form of intellectual intimacy, it can be uncomfortable and threatening. Rather than seeing questioning as an opportunity for growth, they may interpret it as an intrusion into their private life or an exposure of their ignorance, which engenders resentment. Fourthly, people who are not accustomed to critical thinking or intellectual discourse may find it difficult to engage with this type of questioning productively. If they feel overwhelmed, hurt, or unable to follow, they become frustrated and resentful. Lacking the tools or mindset to appreciate the method, they may dismiss it as a waste of time, a futile exercise, or an aggression. Finally, the Socratic questioning, when not properly understood or contextualized, can be perceived as confrontational rather than as a cooperative search for truth. Some confuse incessant interrogation with an attack on their values or their intelligence, rather than a sincere attempt to explore ideas more deeply. When people do not recognize the constructive nature of questioning, they are more inclined to harbor resentment. Thus, although Socratic questioning can lead to growth and understanding, for some people the emotional impact of confronting their own presuppositions and limitations may be too difficult to process in the moment, thereby generating long-term resentment.

Let us take some examples from Plato's dialogues, where the Socratic questioning provokes not a positive transformation or a "conversion," but rather a negative reaction, even resentment. These situations highlight the limits and risks of the Socratic method, sometimes perceived as aggressive, humiliating, or even violent by certain interlocutors.

In the *Meno*, Anytus, an important Athenian politician, appears briefly. Socrates seemingly questions Anytus, but his interrogation is in fact a disguised critique, albeit a cautious one, a typical Socratic strategy, which in this case serves to expose Anytus' ignorance and the hypocrisy of the Athenians on the problem of virtue. Socrates does not openly denounce Anytus; he leads him to denounce himself through his incoherent answers, which is subtler and more effective than a simple critique. Socrates feigns wonder at Anytus' "wisdom," while asking him to prove that virtue can be taught. But Anytus, unable to meet the challenge, reacts with anger: he accuses Socrates of slandering the sophists and scorning traditional values. He rejects Socrates' criticisms without seeking to understand their basis. He quickly concludes that Socrates is dangerous for the youth and for Athenian institutions, and he leaves the conversation in anger. This exchange can be interpreted as a prelude to Socrates' later condemnation, since Anytus will be one of the principal accusers at the trial, the expression of a lasting rancor.

In *The Republic*, Thrasymachus, a provocative sophist, asserts that justice is nothing other than the interest of the stronger. He criticizes Socrates' philosophical ideals and defends a brutal and realistic vision of power. Faced with Socrates' incessant questions, Thrasymachus is forced to clarify and defend his positions, which makes him increasingly irritated. He ends up abandoning the debate, refusing to continue the discussion. He accuses Socrates of going in circles and of not providing concrete answers. He feels humiliated by the way Socrates forces him to reveal the contradictions in his reasoning. Thrasymachus shows no sign of intellectual or moral growth. On the contrary, he seems to leave the dialogue with reinforced anger, perceiving Socrates' approach as a personal attack.

In the *Gorgias*, Callicles, a powerful and confident sophist, defends a cynical vision of justice in which the strong must dominate the weak. He criticizes Socrates' moral idealism. Under Socrates' insistent questioning, Callicles finds himself cornered by his logical contradictions and simplistic assertions. However, instead of accepting this challenge, he becomes increasingly frustrated and hostile. He accuses Socrates of playing with words and of failing to respect the realities of power and politics. He refuses to acknowledge the flaws in his own thinking and rejects any form of compromise. Although Socrates seeks to engage in constructive dialogue, Callicles remains firmly entrenched in his positions and seems to harbor resentment toward Socrates for having publicly exposed his contradictions.

In the *Euthyphro*, Euthyphro, a pious man, confidently asserts that he knows what is pleasing to the gods, and thus justifies his intention to prosecute his own father for murder by invoking the will of the gods. Under Socrates' questions, Euthyphro realizes that his religious beliefs lack coherence and solid foundation, that they are much more vague and contradictory than he thought. Although Euthyphro does not reach a satisfactory conclusion, he seems to have gained a better understanding of the complexity of moral and religious concepts, but he ends up abandoning his attempts to provide a clear definition of piety. Instead of continuing the discussion, he grows discouraged; he ends up abandoning the dialogue, saying that he has something else to do, thereby avoiding fully confronting his own contradictions. He does not explicitly show anger, but his growing annoyance and embarrassment are perceptible through his short answers and evasive attempts. Several times, he tries to change the subject or weakly rephrase his arguments, a sign that he is being pushed to the limit. His hasty departure at the end, under the pretext of urgent business,

suggests an underlying frustration with the Socratic method, which he seems to perceive as destabilizing or humiliating.

In the *Gorgias*, Polus, a young disciple of Gorgias, defends the idea that tyrants are the most powerful and the happiest because they can satisfy all their desires without constraint. Socrates challenges this simplistic vision of power and happiness by showing that tyrants, in reality, live in fear and injustice. He demonstrates that their apparent freedom is in fact a form of moral slavery. Polus, irritated by Socrates' criticisms, tries to resist but quickly finds himself cornered in his contradictions. Instead of admitting his errors, he becomes increasingly frustrated and ends up completely rejecting Socrates' argumentation. His hostile attitude and reluctance to accept the conclusions of the exchange show that he perceives the dialogue as a personal humiliation rather than as an opportunity for intellectual growth.

In the *Charmides*, Critias, an ambitious young aristocrat, takes part in a dialogue on temperance. When Socrates begins to ask questions about the nature of this virtue, Critias engages somewhat in the discussion. However, as Socrates exposes the weaknesses of the definitions proposed by Critias, the latter begins to feel personally targeted. Socrates' constant pressure to analyze and criticize his ideas creates a palpable tension. Toward the end of the dialogue, Critias shows signs of impatience and frustration. He implicitly accuses Socrates of seeking to ridicule him in front of the other participants. Even if the dialogue does not end in open conflict, it is clear that Critias feels a certain resentment toward Socrates for exposing his intellectual shortcomings. This experience could explain why, in later Athenian history, Critias became one of the Thirty Tyrants hostile to Socrates.

These examples show that the Socratic questioning can be perceived as violent or humiliating, when interlocutors are not ready to accept their own contradictions or to question their deeply held beliefs. They see in it a threat to their identity, their status, or their convictions. The Socratic practice is a powerful tool, effective in revealing contradictions and encouraging critical reflection, but it provokes negative emotions when interlocutors feel judged, humiliated, or put in difficulty , especially publicly , and it provokes resistance and rancor when it touches sensitive aspects of personality or well-entrenched beliefs.

It must therefore be understood that transgression is a driver of progress. From then on, the Socratic dialogue is not designed as an end in itself, but as a step toward deeper understanding. Transgression enriches common sense, thanks to new ideas or perspectives that emerge, but that may initially jar against common sense. Dialectic produces new concepts, because it forces thought to step outside itself, by compelling it to relate to what it is not. This process, although it may seem initially chaotic, is a source of progress. Thus, even if the Socratic dialogue or common reason may seem restrictive and violent at the outset, they ultimately open the way to intellectual innovations and transformations. For this, it is important to recall that the quest for truth or meaning is not a solitary exercise, but a dialogical effort.

To defend the idea that the Socratic dialogue or confrontation with common reason is beneficial for all, even when it hurts, one must understand its following aspects. Truth as a liberating common good. Acceptance of cognitive dissonance as a stage of growth. The regulatory and structuring role of common sense. The importance of intellectual humility. Transgression as a driver of progress. The group as a safeguard against subjectivity. Collective

wisdom as the foundation of shared thought. Understanding this dynamic allows one to transform the initial shock into an opportunity to better understand the world and oneself , but it operates over time.

## EQUANIMITY

We may also ask whether Socrates' famous equanimity can be considered as proof of his non-violence. For one can set side by side two apparently opposing dimensions of the man: his inner peace, his calm in the face of anger, insult, injustice, or even death, and the disturbing effect of his dialectical practice, which some describe as abusive.

Equanimity, that is, the ability to remain calm, impartial, and detached from disturbing emotions, is a central trait of Socrates' character, reflecting his commitment to reason, justice, and the pursuit of truth. This tranquility of soul, later conceived as an ideal, named *ataraxia* by the Stoics, manifests itself in him in various ways. His calm in the face of death as described in *The Apology*. His refusal to seek revenge or to complain. His ability to endure mockery and injustice. His lack of anger in the face of contradiction. He seeks neither to convince by force nor to impose himself emotionally, for his goal is truth, not domination. In this sense, his equanimity is a form of non-violence. It testifies to his refusal to resort to verbal or physical aggression, to an inner ethical posture founded on self-mastery, on a concern for justice, even toward his enemies. Socrates does not strike, he does not threaten, he does not manipulate, though some contest such a claim, he does not grow irritated: he questions, sheds light, makes ignorance visible, but always in a logic serving the "Good." He never shows personal anger or resentment toward those who

criticize him or resist his ideas. Through his constant calm and self-mastery, he avoids resorting to aggressive emotional tactics. Even when he exposes the contradictions of his interlocutors, he does so with a respectful and benevolent attitude. In *The Apology*, Socrates faces his accusers with calm and dignity. He refuses to defend himself by flattering the judges or by adopting a provocative tone, even though he makes use of irony. On the contrary, he presents his arguments with clarity and simplicity, even accepting the death sentence with serenity. Socrates declares that he would rather die faithful to his principles than survive by renouncing his philosophical mission. This peaceful attitude illustrates his rejection of any form of violence, including that of vengeance or rebellion.

In the *Crito*, he explains why he refuses to flee Athens despite the injustice of his trial. He justifies his decision by affirming that respecting the laws of the city, even imperfect ones, is a moral obligation, a choice that reflects a form of passive and non-violent resistance. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates calmly discusses his own death with his friends, showing remarkable serenity. He explains that philosophy is a training for death, which highlights his detachment from worldly fears and desires, a rejection of strong emotions. Socrates' equanimity is a manifestation of the virtue of "self-mastery," which he considers essential to a good life. By controlling his emotions and remaining calm in the face of adversity, he embodies a model of non-violent behavior. Moreover, Socrates' equanimity is not cold or distant; it is imbued with benevolence. He seeks to help his interlocutors progress intellectually and morally, without trying to humiliate or wound them, even if some interlocutors experience it as aggression.

Nevertheless, this non-violence of behavior does not prevent a certain symbolic violence, and herein lies the ambiguity. His questioning destabilizes,

sometimes humiliates, and confuses. It lays bare contradictions, which can be experienced as an attack on identity. Several interlocutors feel in their exchanges with him a form of psychic violence: Meno complains of being "numbed," Alcibiades speaks of a Socrates who "pierces the soul," etc. Moreover, one has the impression that he always ends up being right, which seems to "crush" his interlocutors. And he has no "pity" for their emotions, even if he remains patient with them. There is therefore a violence of meaning, a violence of lucidity, which Socrates nonetheless assumes as inevitable, as a necessary condition in the service of truth and inner transformation. Certainly, Socrates seeks neither to harm nor to impose. His equanimity confirms that he is not driven by destructive impulses, that he does not react out of vengeance or anger. Even if his discourse acts as a shock, as an electric shock that may be felt as violent, especially if one wishes to protect one's image, if one clings to one's illusions, in this sense, Socrates' equanimity is proof of his ethical and personal non-violence. But this does not cancel the disturbing power of his speech, which can be received as a form of epistemic or existential violence, even though it is fundamentally in the service of the "Good." Thus, some critics emphasize that the Socratic method is a form of "intellectual violence," for it constantly and radically highlights the contradictions and errors of his interlocutors, without respite, which can be humiliating. However, Socrates' equanimity softens this critique, for he never expresses contempt or superiority toward those he questions. For example, in the *Gorgias*, faced with Callicles, who becomes increasingly hostile, Socrates maintains his calm and continues to pose respectful questions, thereby avoiding any escalation of conflict. His equanimity shows that his intention is manifestly always oriented toward the moral and intellectual improvement of his interlocutors, which excludes any will to harm or dominate.

Thus, Socrates' equanimity seems to be a significant indicator of his non-violence. It manifests itself in his calm in the face of adversity, his refusal to resort to emotional or manipulative tactics, and his commitment to constructive dialogue. Although some may perceive the Socratic method as potentially "violent" on the intellectual or identity plane, Socrates' benevolent and respectful attitude somewhat dissipates this interpretation. Such an attitude is not only proof of his non-violence, but also a model of ethical behavior that privileges reason, justice, and compassion. Yet one may well marvel at the spectacular effects of his practice.

Thus equanimity, defined as the ability to remain calm, detached, and impartial in the face of emotion or provocation, seems to be an admirable quality, a rather rare form of self-mastery. However, in certain situations it provokes negative reactions in interlocutors, who may feel anger, indignation, and perceive this attitude as a form of symbolic violence, stemming from various factors. For when a person shows equanimity while his interlocutor is emotionally involved, in anger, frustration, or sadness, this contrast produces a sense of relational imbalance. The interlocutor feels misunderstood or ignored, since his emotions are not mirrored, taken up, or validated. For example, if someone expresses anger with passion and the other responds calmly, without showing any corresponding emotion, this may be perceived as an implicit rejection of the interlocutor's feelings. This emotional asymmetry can be deeply unsettling. Equanimity can also give the impression that the detached person is placing himself on a "moral pedestal," that he remains indifferent to the legitimate concerns of his counterpart, or that he disdains him. This can fuel a sense of injustice, resentment, or frustration.
Although equanimity is not necessarily synonymous with indifference, it can be interpreted as a lack of compassion. The interlocutor feels isolated or judged,

especially if his emotions are intense and he expects an emotionally engaging response. For example, a person in distress is likely to hope for words of comfort or gestures of support, and equanimity then seems distant or clinical, like a doctor observing his patient, exacerbating the sense of isolation, the perception of coldness or distance, and a lack of empathy. Likewise, equanimity can be perceived as an attempt at intellectual or moral domination, a position of strength, a social distance, where the detached person seems superior or inaccessible because he masters his emotions, which easily provokes anger or rancor in those who feel diminished or subordinated. It can also be perceived as a strategy for avoiding genuine emotional engagement or an expected confrontation, as a way of circumventing the problem or minimizing the concerns of the interlocutor. For example, when someone accuses Socrates of "playing with words" or of not taking his arguments seriously, he perceives Socrates' equanimity, this absence of direct confrontation, as a form of passive resistance that prevents genuine dialogue. And when this attitude is used to maintain an unshakable posture, it frustrates those who seek to "break through" this immobility, to make "contact," or to obtain a more "human" reaction. A judge or a teacher who remains calm in the face of emotional criticism may seem to exercise implicit and asymmetrical power, which can be felt as unjust or condescending.

Certainly, equanimity is effective as a framework for exposing the logical or emotional flaws of the interlocutor. Socrates uses his calm to better highlight the contradictions in his interlocutors' arguments. This can be experienced as a form of intellectual violence, for it forces the other to confront his own limits, a form of humiliation. Thus, in the *Gorgias*, Callicles ends up feeling belittled when Socrates, with calm and method, exposes the contradictions in his cynical vision of justice. Equanimity, calm and poised, easily produces an effect of

exposure in others, a form of symbolic violence. It disarms the interlocutor psychologically, for it refuses to play by the implicit rules of ordinary exchange, of a more spontaneous and emotional nature. This disorientation, deeply destabilizing, can be experienced as an indirect attack on the identity or integrity of the interlocutor. Equanimity can then be perceived as a tool to impose a certain vision of the world or to avoid responding to the interlocutor's genuine concerns, reinforcing the impression that the detached person manipulates the situation to his advantage, a sort of instrumentalization of neutrality.

Thus the interlocutor may feel powerless before a person who remains calm and rational, especially if he seeks to provoke an emotional reaction, which engenders anger or frustration. Such a situation may lead some interlocutors to reject the discussion altogether or to abandon the exchange, believing that they will not be understood, since they feel dismissed. And when equanimity highlights the weaknesses or contradictions of the interlocutor, this may provoke a sense of humiliation or loss of status, inflicting a narcissistic wound. In Socrates' case, his equanimity allows him to remain faithful to his philosophical mission, but it also contributes to the frustration or anger of certain interlocutors, who feel exposed or destabilized, even violated.

Nevertheless, we must mention in this regard a somewhat significant and dramatic incident in Socrates' life, on the eve of his death. The episode in which Socrates sends his wife Xanthippe home is recounted in the *Phaedo*, a dialogue that relates Socrates' last moments before his execution. This event is significant and deserves to be analyzed in light of the philosophical context, of Socrates' pedagogical intentions, and of his equanimity.

Xanthippe, Socrates' wife, is present at the beginning of the fateful day. She is described as being deeply emotionally affected by the situation, weeping and

lamenting her husband's fate. Socrates then asks his disciples to escort her home. After her departure, Socrates can focus on his philosophical discussions with his friends, addressing subjects such as the immortality of the soul and the nature of life after death.

Socrates seems to want to preserve an atmosphere calm and conducive to philosophical reflection. The tears and lamentations of Xanthippe, though understandable on the human level, risk disturbing the peace necessary to address profound questions of death and immortality. By sending his wife away, Socrates creates a space where he and his disciples can discuss without being distracted by emotions too intense. This gesture can be seen as an illustration of Socratic philosophy, which places particular emphasis on *sophrosyne* (moderation and self-mastery). While Xanthippe openly expresses her grief, Socrates, on the other hand, remains calm and detached in the face of death. This contrast highlights the superiority of the philosophical attitude, which consists in accepting death with serenity, since it is a natural stage of life. By sending Xanthippe away, Socrates shows that he privileges reason and contemplation over disordered emotions.

Socrates considers philosophy as a preparation for death. Through this somewhat violent gesture, he symbolically affirms that death is not an event to be feared or mourned, but a transition toward a higher truth. This attitude reflects his commitment to the pursuit of truth and his conviction that the philosophical life transcends earthly attachments, including family ties. But one may also suppose that Socrates acted out of compassion toward his wife. By sending her home, he may perhaps have spared her the pain of having to witness his last breath. This interpretation humanizes Socrates, showing that he does not entirely neglect the emotions of his loved ones, even if he gives

priority to his philosophical ideals. The sending away of Xanthippe can also be read as a symbol of the rupture between two worlds: the world of emotions and human attachments, represented by Xanthippe, and the world of reason and the immortality of the soul, embodied by Socrates and his disciples. This gesture marks a clear transition between the private sphere and the philosophical sphere, underlining that Socrates, even in the face of death, remains faithful to his role as philosopher. But finally, one may still discern in it a certain radicality or rigidity that disregards the emotional dimension of the human, in conformity with his habitual behavior and his love of reason.

## MORALITY

There exists a subtle yet significant link between Socrates' morality, centered on knowledge and practical wisdom, and the accusations of violence or social harm brought against him. This link stems from the practical and social implications of his philosophical method, as well as the tensions it generated in the social context of the time.

Socrates is a proponent of virtue, but for him virtue is above all knowledge, or today we might say awareness, in the cognitive sense of the term. For Socrates, a person who truly knows the good will always act according to that good; ignorance is therefore the source of evil and immoral behavior. Thus, by asking incessant questions, Socrates seeks to lead his interlocutors to recognize their ignorance and to become aware of their moral contradictions, to clarify their ideas and purify their soul. He pushes them to think critically and autonomously in order to become responsible.

But this stance has political and social connotations. It is perceived as a threat to the established order, since such an attitude challenges traditional beliefs, social norms, and figures of authority. Thus Socrates can be seen as a disruptor of social harmony. The Athenians therefore accused Socrates of corrupting the youth by encouraging them to question dominant values and to become skeptical toward institutions, or by inciting them “not to believe in the gods of the city”, which destabilized the Athenians' certainties. And as we have already seen, his moral concern for knowledge led him to question his fellow citizens relentlessly in order to guide them toward moral “truths”, which was often perceived as violent.

Socratic morality rests on the idea that no one holds absolute truth and that everyone must be ready to examine their beliefs critically. This directly contradicted the claims of various authorities who asserted that they possessed definitive knowledge or truths, an unacceptable challenge to the established order, a disruptive effect of reflection. By insisting on the importance of knowledge and practical wisdom, Socrates exposes the flaws of existing moral and political systems, which can be perceived as an attack on social stability. Thus the Athenian judges saw in Socrates a threat to their own power, since he encouraged young people to think for themselves and to reject imposed doctrines. Socratic morality values critical reflection and intellectual autonomy, which brought it into conflict with the collective and religious values of Athens, with tradition.

Although Socrates was not driven by a desire to harm, his insistence on knowledge and truth produced disruptive effects, an indirect violence. In so doing, he exposed the contradictions of individuals and institutions, which could be experienced as a form of symbolic violence. By encouraging youth to

question traditions, he created a sense of social instability among those who valued the established order. Socrates, who presented himself as a philosopher seeking truth and virtue, was therefore perceived by some as a danger to society. This tragic irony illustrates how a morality based on knowledge can come into conflict with social and political expectations. There thus exists a clear link between Socrates' morality and the accusations brought against him. Socratic morality, though oriented toward the common good and virtue, came into conflict with the structures of power and the traditional values of his time, which explains why he was perceived as a threat and accused of causing harm. This tension underscores the difficulty of reconciling a philosophy founded on knowledge and practical wisdom with the expectations and interests of a given society.

There is a particularly interesting dialogue that highlights the "scandalous" side of the Socratic morality: the controversy between Socrates and Hippias in Plato's *Lesser Hippias*. It reveals an essential moral tension concerning the problem of lying, cunning, and the relation to truth, embodied in the comparison between Achilles and Odysseus.

The debate turns around the two heroes of the *Iliad*, in order to determine which of the two is more honest. These figures represent opposing moral models: Achilles embodies a kind of naïve and spontaneous virtue. Odysseus represents a calculated and sophisticated virtue. Hippias, a sophist renowned for his knowledge and his pride, argues that Achilles is the more honest of the two, since he is frank, direct, courageous, always sincere, even if he often changes his mind. He is a model of nobility and integrity because he acts with sincerity and honesty. Hippias cites a passage from the *Iliad* where Achilles declares that he "hates as much as the gates of Hades the man who says one

thing and hides another in his heart," which shows that he rejects all forms of deception or duplicity. Odysseus, on the contrary, is deceitful, manipulative, a man of cunning; in Homer's *Odyssey* he is called "the man of many wiles." Hippias thus relies on the traditional image of Achilles as the loyal hero and Odysseus as the ambiguous figure, a liar by strategy. Socrates tries to overturn this opinion by questioning Hippias. He begins by asking what it means to lie, and pushes Hippias to admit, step by step, that one who lies voluntarily knows the truth, and is therefore more competent and intelligent than one who lies unintentionally. Thus, lying voluntarily is superior to lying involuntarily, because honesty presupposes knowledge. Now Odysseus lies voluntarily, strategically, while Achilles sometimes seems to lie involuntarily, since he changes his mind and contradicts himself, often emotionally. Odysseus would therefore be the more honest of the two, for he lies with full awareness, whereas Achilles does not master his own discourse. Socrates thus completely overturns the moral hierarchy established by Hippias, which is quite close to common sense.

For Hippias, lying is always an evil, therefore Odysseus is inferior. For Socrates, evil comes from ignorance, therefore it is better to do wrong knowing what one does than not knowing what one does. One can say that this paradox is deliberately provocative. It is not so much that Socrates celebrates Odysseus as a moral model; his aim is not to promote cunning as a virtue, but rather to destabilize Hippias' moral certainties, and to show that simplistic and dogmatic moral judgments are problematic. This conclusion is ironic and uncomfortable: it prescribes nothing, it deconstructs. It unsettles what seems obvious, pushes one to reflect on notions such as lying and cunning, ignorance and responsibility, intelligence and virtue. Thus Odysseus, being conscious, is closer to virtue; the real evil is ignorance, not cunning under control. From this point of view, lying does not in itself constitute evil, unlike ignorance. This dialogue

shows that Socratic morality does not rest on common appearances or heroic conventions, but on a rigorous examination of conscience, knowledge, and intention. Socrates does not say that cunning is good, but that involuntary lying is the sign of a greater evil: ignorance of oneself. Socrates does not offer Odysseus as an ideal, but as an ambiguous figure that compels reflection. Odysseus, in Homer, is cunning, deceitful, strategic, a polymorphous and ambiguous figure, midway between the hero and the sophist. Socrates uses this ambiguity to question the very notion of virtue: is self-mastery, even in cunning, worth more than ignorant spontaneity? But he never goes so far as to say that cunning under control is moral in itself. He does not settle the issue. What Socrates really seems to defend is awareness of one's acts, lucidity about the Good, and moral responsibility founded on knowledge.

We may conclude that there is a close and profound link between Socratic morality, founded on self-knowledge and the search for the Good through reason, and the accusations of violence and immorality made against him by his contemporaries. This link lies in the subversive character of his conception of morality, as we have just seen. Socrates supports several propositions: no one does evil voluntarily, all wrongdoing is due to ignorance; virtue is science, one must know the Good in order to act well; the "good" life is the one in which one examines one's beliefs, where one seeks the truth about oneself and about justice. Practical wisdom consists in ordering one's life according to the Good, and not according to opinions, established laws, or pleasures. It is an exacting morality, inward, radically founded on reason, not on tradition, laws, religion, or social conventions.

Yet this morality was perceived as immoral in various ways. Socrates was accused of impiety, of not recognizing the gods of the city, for several reasons.

He did not practice the traditional ritual worship of the city. He spoke of a *daimonion*, a divine inner voice that guided his actions, which seemed like a form of personal cult or private divine inspiration, outside civic institutions. He criticized popular beliefs about the gods, for example the idea that the gods could be jealous, deceitful, or unjust, and therefore rejected the classic anthropomorphic mythological accounts. He was thus accused of corrupting the youth, of being a troublemaker in the city. These accusations make sense if one understands that his morality delegitimized traditional authority, whether family, religion, or politics, indirectly but radically, by placing individual conscience, the search for the good, and reason above ties of blood and customary duties. He did not reject the family as such, but he refused to make it the ultimate foundation of morality and identity, replacing it with the primacy of conscience over family duties. He undermined the conventional foundations of virtue, such as honor, obedience, or ritual piety. He questioned social hierarchy and established forms of knowledge, notably those of sophists, poets, and politicians. In other words, his search for truth desacralized figures of authority, which was perceived as a form of symbolic violence: he destroyed without imposing anything concrete in return, except for an inner demand unbearable to many.

Socratic morality therefore represents a form of violence. For his method of questioning shattered certainties, publicly exposed ignorance, provoked shame, dismay, and humiliation. Even if he claimed to serve truth, the shock he caused was often experienced as a form of moral or intellectual violence. Hence the confusion between a real immorality, attributed to him by his adversaries, and a perceived immorality, because he did not respect traditional forms of virtue. Thus, Socratic morality is morally scandalous, in placing individual conscience and rational inquiry above collective norms. It

emphasizes that morality cannot be reduced to simple principles, but must take into account the complexity of human situations. Whereas Hippias defends a traditional, simplistic morality based on sincerity and honesty, Socrates proposes a subtler vision that values critical reflection and adaptability. He proposes a "higher" morality, but one perceived as destructive by those who live in conformity. This is why his morality is seen as immoral, his quest for wisdom as violence, his inner demand as a public threat. One may even highlight the scandalous dimension of his position by comparing his doctrine to that of Kant, the great Western moralist, for whom lying is in itself a strict violation of moral duty and can never be justified, whatever the circumstances or intentions. According to him, lying contradicts the categorical imperative, which requires that our actions be capable of being raised to universal laws. For if everyone regularly lied, social trust would collapse, making all communication impossible, which renders lying intrinsically immoral.

Thus, one may very well say that Socrates maintained an ambiguous, even paradoxical, relationship with morality. He was an uncompromising defender of it, constantly affirming that it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it, or that the Good is superior to opinion, law, or personal comfort. He seems to embody an absolute moral figure, almost ascetic, incorruptible, faithful to his conscience, ready to die for his truth, and yet at the same time he never clearly defined the Good. He defended essential moral values such as justice, virtue, courage, or piety, but he did not provide positive and stable explanations of these notions. He presented himself as the moralist who does not know what the Good is, while orienting everything toward it and affirming that he did not know what it was, while not respecting or even ridiculing the prevailing moral norms. Thus, he disturbed the established moral order while proclaiming himself the most moral of all. He was perceived as subversive, even immoral,

even while claiming to be an ethical educator. He moralized while denying being a master, he gave no doctrine, claimed no authority, he inspired without prescribing, corrected without imposing rules, led without guiding explicitly. He refused all authority, while exercising moral authority. He unsettled established customs, while affirming that he served the common Good. He fully embodied a paradoxical morality, which could be considered troubling, destructive, or aggressive.

## THE MISSION

Various animal metaphors are used to characterize Socrates, shedding light on his role and the violence he embodies. One famous example is the “gadfly,” a metaphor used by Socrates himself in *The Apology*, when he defends his philosophical mission before the Athenian court that judges him for impiety and corrupting the youth. In his defense speech, Socrates explains how he spent his life questioning the Athenians, provoking them intellectually and pushing them to reflect on fundamental questions such as virtue, justice, and knowledge. To justify his role, he compares his mission to that of a gadfly, an annoying insect, sometimes painful, yet essential to awaken consciences. “I am attached to this city by the god; you may call me a gadfly, who, without ceasing, awakens, persuades, and reproaches each one of you all day long.” Or again: “The city is like a great and noble horse, sluggish because of its size, in need of being stirred up by a gadfly. And I believe that the god has fastened me to this city to fulfill this role.” Socrates sees himself as the one who disturbs the Athenians in their intellectual and moral lethargy. His aim is not to harm, but to shake their certainties and incite them to philosophize, like a gadfly that stings a lazy horse to wake it up and make it move forward. His role is divinely

inspired; he considers himself an instrument sent by Apollo to awaken consciences and promote the search for truth. He acknowledges that his insistent questions and criticisms may appear unpleasant to those he interrogates. Yet he maintains that this irritation is necessary to avoid intellectual and moral stagnation.

This metaphor illustrates several important aspects of Socrates' personality and mission. His perseverance, for like a gadfly that never ceases to pester, Socrates pursues his task of questioning and challenging without respite. His critical role, for he plays the part of awakening in a society he deems asleep or indifferent to fundamental truths. His apparent modesty, for in comparing himself to a small insect, Socrates minimizes his own importance while affirming the crucial weight of his mission. His devotion, for his mission comes from the god, and he is prepared to assume it entirely, including the "negative" consequences for others and for himself.

We should mention as well the "hunting dog" metaphor, sometimes invoked by modern commentators to describe Socrates, that seems appropriate. For his tenacity, like a hound, Socrates never gives up on a line of questioning. For his instinct for truth, as he follows the "scent" of a logical inconsistency or false belief to its source. For his loyalty to the pursuit, as he is devoted to the search for truth, not to any personal gain or reputation. However, this is a retrospective interpretation, which Plato did not use.

Once again, this comparison can be interpreted in different ways depending on context and the reader's sensibility. The hunting dog may be seen as a symbol of perseverance, the animal that relentlessly pursues a trail until it reaches its target. Socrates never releases his investigation until he has exposed the contradictions or ignorance of his interlocutor. This image highlights his

intellectual rigor and his refusal to be satisfied with superficial answers. Moreover, just as the hunting dog is guided by instinct or scent, Socrates uses his intellectual intuition to detect logical errors or implicit assumptions in others' arguments. And the hunting dog is typically faithful to its master; in an analogous way, Socrates remains faithful to his mission of seeking truth, even if this renders him unpopular or provokes defensive reactions in his interlocutors. In a positive sense, the hunting dog metaphor is not violent; it rather illustrates Socrates' determination and meticulousness in his quest for truth. The "hunt" here is intellectual, not physical: it is a matter of pursuing ideas or contradictions, not human beings. This image may be seen as a metaphor of intellectual curiosity and philosophical rigor, qualities essential to any seeker of truth. On the other hand, some may perceive this metaphor as having a violent or intrusive dimension. Indeed, like a hunting dog that never releases its prey, through his relentless insistence Socrates seems to "harass" his interlocutors, driving them into a corner until they acknowledge their errors or ignorance. This insistence can provoke strong emotional reactions, frustration, anger, or humiliation. Some of Socrates' interlocutors feel cornered or destabilized by his approach, which could be interpreted as a form of "symbolic violence." The Socratic method can have a paralyzing or disorienting effect, comparable to that of a hunted animal that feels trapped. One can indeed observe in it an undeniable psychological pressure.

## THE SORCERER

There is another metaphor, not animal, which is nevertheless interesting for examining the Socratic "violence": the metaphor of the sorcerer or of

enchantment, relatively common in describing Socrates among his contemporaries and later writers. It was used to convey the mysterious and powerful impact Socrates had on his interlocutors, who, through his reasoning and questioning, seemed to be “bewitched,” brought to a recognition against their own will or initial resistance. Plato often depicts Socrates as a magnetic figure, capable of captivating his interlocutors and compelling them to question their preconceived ideas. In the *Meno*, for instance, Meno accuses Socrates of having bewitched him, saying that he feels numb, comparing Socrates to a magician who casts a spell, leaving him confused and unable to respond. In *Charmides*, Socrates is described as having a mysterious, almost magical effect on young men, and Critias warns Charmides that Socrates might "cast a spell" on him with his questions. In *The Symposium*, Alcibiades describes the effect of Socrates’ words in similar terms, likening them to the songs of the Sirens and claiming that his words enchant and possess him. Thus the Athenians perceived this capacity to perplex and “turn” arguments as a kind of magic or sorcery, which contributed to his condemnation to death. Although In *Apology*, Socrates protests, by mentioning that his accusers have portrayed him wrongfully as a kind of sorcerer or sophist who corrupts the youth with tricky arguments, and returns to them the accusation: “*My accusers, however, are like skilled magicians with their polished words.*"

This idea of enchantment echoes the way Socrates challenges the convictions of his interlocutors with such insistence that it becomes difficult for them to escape once engaged in his reasoning. Like a sorcerer who bewilders his victims, Socrates draws them into the meshes of dialectic until they are confronted with contradictions in their own thought. The metaphor of the sorcerer is a figurative way of describing Socrates’ effect: through constant interrogation and penetrating intellect, he transforms his interlocutors,

sometimes radically, even disturbingly, pushing them toward introspection. This “power” may be perceived as violent, in the sense that it suggests a kind of mental or emotional control, compelling his interlocutors to question deeply held beliefs under the pressure of his questioning. The idea of enchantment implies that people are, in some sense, manipulated or subjected to an external force, which can be read as a form of psychological or intellectual violence. His approach is disorienting, often uncomfortable, and may thus give an impression of violence, especially since his interlocutors were not always prepared to be pushed so relentlessly into their own recesses, nor always willing to do so. The metaphor of the sorcerer or enchanter conveys a kind of intellectual constraint, for Socrates is portrayed as wielding a power that goes beyond the normal scope of rational persuasion. His interlocutors often feel powerless before his dialectic. The comparison with the torpedo fish that numbs its prey suggests an imposed intellectual paralysis, a form of passive aggression. Enchantment implies a loss of control and autonomy, and Socrates’ interlocutors complain that they are no longer “masters of themselves.”

That said, this intellectual violence can also be understood from another angle: as a means of purifying the soul, as Plato explains on several occasions. Socrates, through his method, compels people to rid themselves of false ideas, which can be seen as a liberating process. Thus, while the metaphor may evoke pressure or dominance, it is also tied to the idea of moral and intellectual progress. The metaphor of enchantment may indeed be judged violent insofar as it implies control or manipulation of others’ thought, but this violence is essentially constructive, aimed at bringing about revelation or awareness rather than causing real harm. Moreover, in the dialogues it is sometimes acknowledged after the fact as beneficial by those who underwent it. The interlocutor, or the reader, realizes that this violence serves the pursuit of truth

rather than personal domination. Indeed, Socrates himself rejects this characterization, presenting himself instead as a “gadfly” who awakens rather than as an enchanter who paralyzes. The metaphor of the sorcerer above all testifies to the profound and unsettling impact of the Socratic method on established certainties, creating an intellectual unease that could be perceived as a kind of violence, insofar as the interlocutor neither controls nor fully understands what is happening but merely undergoes it, though this “intrusion into the psyche” is in fact meant to free the mind from false opinions. The impact of his method appears all the more violent in proportion to the individual’s refusal to confront himself. Dialogue with Socrates seems all the more painful for those unprepared to face their own contradictions.

## CRITICISM

Socrates notices the moods or states of mind of his interlocutors, but he does not criticize them directly as such. He does not qualify their way of being or their excesses; he does not “pin labels” on them, as we might say or denounce today. What he does criticize explicitly are the intellectual and moral consequences of such outbursts or rigidities, that is, the way these mechanisms obstruct rational reflection, the search for truth, or the practice of virtue. Here is how Socrates proceeds concretely, as described in the Platonic dialogues.

**Criticism of anger**

Socrates often notices when his interlocutors grow irritated or angry in response to his insistent questions. Rather than criticizing the emotion itself

directly, he points out that anger prevents a person from reasoning clearly and honestly. In the *Gorgias*, for example, Socrates observes the change in Callicles' attitude: irritated by the rigor of the questioning, he turns contemptuous, accusing him of "babbling like a woman." Socrates remains calm and continues questioning, showing that anger blocks the progress of reasoning. He replies: "Callicles, if you want to go on discussing, you must answer; if not, drop it." He insists on the need to maintain a calm and rational spirit in discussion, underlining that this irritation betrays Callicles' inability to argue rationally. The contrast between Callicles' anger and Socrates' composure illustrates the harmful effect of irritation on thought.

**Criticism of impatience**

Socrates often notes the haste, impatience, or eagerness of his interlocutors to reply without due reflection. He criticizes this state of mind not as mere emotion, but as an obstacle to the intellectual caution required for philosophical inquiry. For example, in *The Republic*, Thrasymachus is impatient to dominate the debate; he grows irritated at not being allowed to present his point of view in a single stretch, and seeks to impose his definition of justice without debate, in an authoritarian and hasty manner: "Justice is the interest of the stronger," he asserts peremptorily. Socrates wants to force him to slow down, to explain, to answer step by step; he reproaches him indirectly for his attitude by urging him toward greater intellectual moderation with ironic threats. "*Don't try to slip away, Thrasymachus! If you do that now, we'll say you've ruined our argument and not given an account of yourself.*" Or again: "*Let's examine it step by step, then. You say justice is the advantage of the stronger? Tell me, who is 'the stronger'? The ruler? The tyrant? The democrat?*

*Be precise."* Same in *Meno*: "*Do not be hasty, Meno. Let's take it step by step. What do you say virtue is?*" He emphasizes the importance of patience in philosophical investigation, implicitly criticizing intellectual haste by showing that without patience and rigor, reflection remains superficial.

**Criticism of vanity**

Socrates does not hesitate to criticize vanity or intellectual pride, as he considers such attitudes particularly harmful to philosophy. He exposes them by showing how they lead to blindness or the pretension of knowing what one does not know. For example, in *The Apology*, Socrates criticizes the vanity of those who claim to know while they do not really know. In *The Apology of Socrates*, he recounts: *"I went to one of those who had the reputation of wisdom, and observed him, his name I need not mention; he was a politician whom I selected for examination, and the result was as follows: When I began to talk with him, I could not help thinking that he was not really wise, although he was thought wise by many, and wiser still by himself. So I tried to explain to him that he thought himself wise, but was not really wise; and the consequence was that he hated me, and his enmity was shared by several who were present and heard me. So I left him, saying to myself, as I went away: 'Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is, for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows. I neither know nor think that I know."*

He recalls questioning politicians, poets, and craftsmen reputed to be "wise", and how they all turned out to be full of pretension, believing they knew what they ignored, a pretension to knowledge that blocks the intellectual humility

necessary for philosophy. He concludes that true knowledge begins with the admission of ignorance, in contrast with pride.

In the same way, he criticizes the flattery of manipulative rhetoric. In the *Gorgias*, he harshly criticizes the sophists who use speech to seduce, persuade, or manipulate rather than to seek the truth. He opposes flattering rhetoric, comparable to cooking for the body, with the true medicine of the soul, in search of truth, which may be bitter but salutary.

**Criticism of social conventions**

Some characters in the Platonic dialogues do not even enter into philosophical discussion; their role is rather to highlight, by contrast, the emptiness of exchanges based purely on social convention or ritual. Socrates implicitly or ironically criticizes those content with mere politeness or platitudes. He does not attack them directly, but his attitude, his questions, his silences, his interruptions, or his insistence on certain points bring to light the vacuity of those who refuse truly to think. His method is a kind of “critical modesty”: he invites each person to judge themselves by reflecting superficiality in the mirror of dialogue. This way of criticizing highlights true philosophy: one that engages, unsettles, and refuses the intellectual comfort of polite or empty speech. For example, in *Republic*, Cephalus makes a long empty speech: "*When someone reaches my age, Socrates, and the threshold of old age, as the poet says, he feels a certain relief and freedom from the passions that once mastered him. The desires relax their hold, and it’s as if one were finally freed from a host of mad masters. But what I miss most, or rather what gives me the greatest pleasure, are the conversations with men of my own age. We recall the past with pleasure, as the saying goes, and when we remember our youthful loves*

*and adventures, it's like reliving them, even if they're long gone. And having money, Socrates, is a great comfort—not for a man of my age, but for the one who comes after me. They say that when you're near the end, you start to fear things you never feared before—like being treated unjustly in the afterlife for wrongs you've done in this life. So I take care to settle my accounts, both with men and gods, in case I've wronged anyone."* Then Socrates interrupts him with an ironical remark and sharp request : *"By the gods, Cephalus, you speak like a man who's lived well. But tell me, when you speak of justice, do you mean simply telling the truth and paying back what one owes?"* Cephalus embodies a worldly figure, respectful of appearances but foreign to the search for truth, the type of interlocutor who prefers conviviality to intellectual confrontation. By placing him on the margins of the debate and silencing him as soon as philosophy truly begins, Plato stages a sharp distinction between those who speak to maintain social appearances and those who speak to think, a discreet but effective reminder of the philosophical mission: to leave behind appearances, conventions, and empty exchanges, to confront the rigor of thinking and the difficulty of examination. Cephalus opens the dialogue but remains only to pronounce a few banalities about old age and justice, then politely withdraws under the pretext of making a sacrifice. He embodies bourgeois propriety, a respectable but unquestioned tradition, illustrating the limits of a mind that lives in "peaceful opinion" without probing the deeper meaning of life.

In the *Protagoras*, Callias is the host of the philosophical banquet, the one in whose house the discussion takes place. But he hardly intervenes on the substance, contenting himself with playing matchmaker and politely welcoming the guests. Plato delights in criticizing these aristocrats who host debates

without truly participating, fascinated by the "culture" of the sophists yet reluctant to think for themselves.

In the *Charmides*, the young Charmides, at the beginning of the dialogue, is presented as very beautiful and very courteous, but he remains rather silent, answering with reserve, even monosyllables, when Socrates begins to question him, suggesting that external beauty or polite manners do not in any way guarantee depth of mind.

These characters are not mere foils or literary ornaments. They serve to expose the worldly posture, social relations based on politeness or propriety, at the expense of genuine engagement in thinking. Their superficiality contrasts with the Socratic posture, which rejects pretense and pursues demanding truth, even at the cost of disturbance. This also shows that philosophical dialogue is an exception: it must be wrested from social banality and linguistic routines.

**Criticism of susceptibility**

Socrates observes that emotional susceptibility often prevents his interlocutors from accepting the questioning required for genuine philosophical discussion. He does not criticize sensitivity itself, but the way it serves as an excuse or a shield against the examination of ideas and self-questioning.

For example, in the *Protagoras*, the famous sophist displays evident intellectual and emotional susceptibility when Socrates questions him about his knowledge; he complains about having to answer briefly: "*Socrates, you're asking me to do something that's not in my nature. I'm used to giving long speeches, like a sophist should, not answering in tiny little phrases. If you were*

*to let me speak at length, I could show you the truth of what I'm saying. But this way, forcing me to answer in a word or two, it's like tying a runner's legs together!*" He feels wounded in his pride and in his role as an expert by Socrates' demand, defending his style almost as part of his intellectual identity. Socrates immediately notices the problem and responds with benevolent irony and diplomacy, trying to defuse Protagoras' sensitivity: *"Protagoras, you must not be allowed to talk as much as you want without me being able to listen. Here is the alternative: either you speak as much as you want, or I ask my questions as I want. For if you take a long detour in your speech and I get lost along the way, how will I know if what you say is right? But if you speak briefly, I will be able to follow you. So, it's up to you to choose: a long detour or a short path*?" He then challenges Protagoras : "*Will you please, Protagoras, answer briefly and simply the questions I put to you, instead of making such long speeches?… You are not doing what you promised. You agreed to answer shortly, but now you decline. If you do not choose to keep your word, I shall not go on questioning you*." By proceeding in this way, his interlocutor may not feel attacked, but is simply confronted with his intellectual responsibilities. Socrates does not directly judge the emotional attitude but reveals its impact on rational discussion, since susceptibility prevents the interlocutor from fully cooperating in dialectical exchange. This is a perfect example of the Socratic method: indirectly exposing the affective obstacles to dialogue, without lapsing into explicit psychology.

**Criticism of Desire**

Socrates regularly criticizes greed, excessive passion, and blind desire, not as isolated emotions, but insofar as they disrupt rational judgment. He shows how

these passions often lead his interlocutors into faulty reasoning, inner contradictions, and morally problematic positions. For example, in the *Gorgias*, Socrates sharply criticizes the thirst for power and immediate pleasure that dominates the thinking of his interlocutors, those who seek wealth and glory. He shows that such appetites divert the soul from its essential mission: self-perfection. He says: *"Those who live always in the pursuit of pleasure, filling themselves constantly with food and drink and the like, are never satisfied and never happy."* And also: *"To live for the satisfaction of desires, and to be continually in need, is the life of a catamite or a glutton; it is not the life of a good or happy man."* Callicles defends the idea that one must satisfy all one's desires, since this would be "natural" and "powerful." Socrates replies: *"Those who are incontinent are like a leaky jar, which cannot keep anything in it; they spend their whole lives filling it with what flows out again. Such a life is miserable and full of toil."* Here he contrasts self-mastery to insatiable desire, which he sees as destructive to the soul.

**Criticism of Intellectual Laziness**

This lack of spiritual vigor is, for Socrates, also a moral failing, he reproaches many of his interlocutors for not examining themselves, for uttering "certainties" without questioning them, a complacency he denounces time and again. The *Philebus* provides a good example of "cowardice", a kind of flight from rational effort. At the very beginning of the dialogue, Philebus asserts that pleasure is the supreme good, but almost immediately after, he withdraws completely from the debate, handing over to Protarchus on the pretext that the latter can defend the position better. Socrates replies: "*Very well, Philebus; if you wish, I will talk with your friend Protarchus instead. But remember, you*

*won't escape sharing in the discussion, even if you hand it over to him!"* It is also Meno, in the dialogue that bears his name, who embodies a form of laziness of the soul: he claims to want to know what virtue is, but becomes discouraged as soon as he realizes he does not know. He quickly adopts the attitude of one who prefers not to search rather than to confront his ignorance. This is the famous moment when he declares that one can neither seek what one already knows, for that would be useless, nor what one does not know, for that would be impossible. *"And how will you inquire, Socrates, into that which you do not know at all? What sort of thing, among those you do not know, will you propose as the object of your search? And even if you actually came upon it, how would you know that this is what you did not know?".* Meno's paradox offers a convenient excuse for inaction: By claiming that *"one cannot seek what one does not know,"* it provides a rationalization to avoid the effort of inquiry, allowing individuals to abandon the search for truth rather than confront their ignorance or the discomfort of uncertainty. It masks intellectual laziness as a logical dilemma: Instead of engaging in the hard work of questioning and learning, the paradox frames passivity as a philosophical problem, making it seem as though the inability to define or understand something is an insurmountable barrier rather than a call to deeper exploration.
Or again, Socrates tells Callicles in the *Gorgias*: "You are a slave to pleasure, Callicles, and you do not take care of your soul as you should. You neglect it, when it should be your primary concern if you truly want to be happy." By accusing Callicles of neglecting his soul in favour of pleasure and power, Socrates reproaches him for moral laziness, an intellectual and ethical inertia, because rather than engaging in the demanding effort of virtue and introspection, Callicles prefers immediate and superficial satisfactions, thus avoiding the work on oneself necessary to achieve a truly good life. By refusing

to question his desires and values, he indulges in a form of moral comfort, where the pursuit of good is sacrificed to the ease of pleasures, without ever questioning the consequences of his choices on his soul.

**Criticism of Fear of Judgment**

This criticism, which includes submission to public opinion, is central to the Socratic attitude. For example, in the *Crito* he asks: "Why should we care about the opinion of the majority, when only those who truly know what is right and wrong matter?". He contrasts the fear of what people will say with the pursuit of what is just, even if it means dying, so as not to betray his conscience under social pressure. For him, the gaze of the ignorant should never guide just action. In *The Apology* he declares: "I will not concern myself with what most people think of me, but only with whether what I do is right or wrong, whether I act as a good man or a bad man." In the *Gorgias*, he denounces the pursuit of approval: “The orators and politicians, Callicles, do not care for your souls. They only aim to gratify you and please you, without considering whether they make you better or worse. But I will not allow you to neglect your soul." In the *Phaedo*: *"Men fear death, not because they know it to be evil, but because they do not know what it is. And because they do not know, they fear it, and they believe whatever they are told about it, even if it is false."* Thus even our relation to death can be distorted by social fear. He invites us to overcome this fear in order to live philosophically, that is, in truth, and not in conformity. He also criticizes authority not grounded in reason, constantly reminding us that one must not blindly obey authority, whether parents, laws, or tradition, without examining its content. Thus, in the *Laches* or the *Menexenus*, he pushes figures of authority to justify their position rationally. This is one of

Socrates' great battles: to free the soul from the power of others' gaze, in order to submit it only to justice and reason.

**Criticism of Sophistry**

Sophistry at the time referred both to an intellectual movement and to a pedagogical practice, the teaching of oratory, rhetoric, and politics. According to Plato, it resembles philosophy but at its core seeks to persuade rather than to discover truth or goodness. It is the art of seeming to know, persuading through clever and intellectually captivating speeches, yet without genuine concern for truth or virtue, a degraded imitation of philosophy, a trade in ideas that fails to nourish the soul. In *Euthydemus*, Socrates criticizes the sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, who employ convoluted and empty arguments, diverting speech from its ethical and rational purpose, since their aim is not to elevate the mind or reach the truth. They claim to teach virtue through biased dialectical methods, a false wisdom, a deceptive approach, even one that infantilizes the interlocutor. Socrates patiently exposes the weaknesses of their reasoning, for he embodies another idea of philosophy: one that seeks truth through humility and rigor. For him, the aim is not to win a dispute but to progress together toward knowledge, in a spirit of authenticity and rigor. Sophistry is denounced as an intellectual deception at the expense of virtue, truth, and rigorous thinking.

**Criticism of Versatility**

In some dialogues, Socrates confronts interlocutors who frequently shift their opinions simply to avoid being contradicted, a form of moral inconsistency. He

criticizes their lack of coherence and their failure to commit to the serious pursuit of truth. Likewise, he attacks positions that claim all opinions are equally valid, or that deny the existence of any objective good or justice. For him, such moral relativism, this complacent skepticism, amounts to an evasion of moral responsibility. For example, in *Euthydemus*, a young man named Clinias, under the barrage of sophistic questioning, keeps changing his mind, not out of deep reflection, but because he is disoriented. He lacks a stable moral compass: he follows whichever argument seems most convincing at the moment, without any real grounding. Or again Euthyphro, in the dialogue of the same name, whom Socrates criticizes both for his arrogance and for the inconsistency of his definition of piety.

**Criticism of Bad Faith**

On the topic of bad faith, Gorgias, offers a striking exchange between Socrates and Callicles.

Socrates: "Tell me, Callicles, do you maintain that the pleasant and the good are the same, or are there pleasant things that are not good, and good things that are not pleasant?"

Callicles: "To avoid contradiction, I say they are the same.”

Socrates: "You are ruining your previous statements, Callicles. If you say what you do not believe, you cannot be a sincere partner in the search for truth."

Callicles: "You do the same thing yourself, Socrates!"

Thus Callicles contradicts himself, which Socrates promptly highlights. Rather than admit he should revise his view, Callicles stubbornly clings to his position,

even though he knows it is illogical. He is therefore aware of being inconsistent with himself, yet he is ready to do anything to survive and to save face. Moreover, when Socrates calls out this bad faith, “If you say what you do not believe”, Callicles immediately resorts to a *tu quoque* retort, revealing his defensiveness; he compounds his bad faith by attacking his interlocutor, thereby avoiding responsibility for what he says or does. This confirms Socrates’ accusation about the abandonment of truth and authenticity. Another example in the same dialogue comes when he retorts: "Tell me, Socrates, are you not ashamed, at your age, to concern yourself with such trivialities and to dwell on words? If someone slips up, you seize on it as an opportunity to confound them!" He thus reduces conceptual problems to mere “slips of language", using them as a way to evade the issue. In doing so, he pretends he can speak without being aware of the implications of his discourse, nor taking responsibility for its coherence. At the same time, he accuses Socrates of nitpicking and of having bad intentions.

The crucial point in this matter is that Socrates is often accused of being too concerned with vocabulary and logic, as if he were teaching rhetoric. But in fact, his concern is not merely formal, for what one says is for him the manifestation of what one is: “speech is the dwelling place of being”, as Heidegger would later put it. What interests Socrates here is not so much the “mistake”, but the acceptance of the mistake, its recognition, for self-awareness lies at the heart of “know thyself”, the humility necessary for the practice of reason. Yet bad faith, the irrational protection of one’s self-image, is the main obstacle to this salutary practice.

At times, conversely, bad faith plays the role of feigned stupidity, pretending misunderstanding or ignorance, another very common strategy used to refuse

dialogue and reason. For example, still in the same dialogue: Callicles: "You're just playing with words, Socrates, and avoiding the real issues!"

Socrates: "You understand perfectly well what I mean, Callicles, but you prefer to pretend you don't understand so you don't have to contradict yourself." Callicles uses deception and evasion to avoid acknowledging his contradictions. He prefers to accuse Socrates of sophistry rather than confront his own inconsistencies. Socrates exposes this bad faith and insists that Callicles understands his arguments but refuses to accept them out of pride or self-interest. Bad faith, indeed, has more than one trick up its sleeve, and Socrates takes pleasure in highlighting it, for the good of all, including Callicles...

**Criticism of the Absence of Virtue**

Socrates sometimes directly accuses certain interlocutors of moral corruption or of lacking virtue. Yet since virtue is, above all, a matter of intellect, he seeks to expose their inconsistencies, both in speech and in conduct. He usually does this through questioning, often ironic, or by relying on implacable logic, rather than through outright attack. For example, he criticizes his interlocutors not for their ignorance, but for their pretense of knowledge, which he considers morally problematic because it prevents self-examination. In the *Menexenus* and the *Crito*, Socrates suggests that the crowd and democratic leaders are morally deficient, guided by opinion rather than truth. He offers himself as a counter-example, refusing to escape his death sentence even though it is unjust, for to do so would be to yield to corruption. His great theme is: “One must not, even in response to injustice, commit evil.” In the *Phaedo*, he contrasts true philosophers with “lovers of the body” and the greedy, asserting

that those who pursue material pleasures live in a state of inner corruption. Philosophy is preparation for death. Those who devote themselves to philosophy are in fact practising dying, and they do not fear death. he says. Thus he indeed accuses certain individuals or types of people of lacking virtue, but he does so within a logic of examination, not personal condemnation. His aim is pedagogical and ethical, never vindictive, since he regards the lack of virtue as the fruit of ignorance rather than of sheer malice.

Beyond individual passions such as anger, greed, or pride, Socrates also denounces collective or cultural attitudes that hinder free thought: conformism, authoritarianism, relativism, obsession with power or image. His goal is always the same: to free the soul so that it may become lucid, coherent, and just. Yet he does not directly judge the moods or states of mind of his interlocutors as intrinsic flaws. What he critiques is the way these psychological states negatively affect philosophical inquiry by disturbing rational clarity, intellectual sincerity, and the possibility of genuine self-examination. In other words, what Socrates condemns is not emotions as such, but their transformation into obstacles to dialogue, truth, and wisdom.

Still, one may wonder why Socrates does not explicitly name the problematic states of mind or attitudes of his interlocutors. Several hypotheses can be proposed.

At Socrates' time, psychology as an autonomous science was not yet formalized. Notions such as "pride", "greed", "anger", etc., were treated in moral or political terms, not as psychological traits in the modern sense. Socrates, like the ancient philosophers more broadly, conceived of the soul in an ethical and rational perspective, centered on the relation between knowledge, will, and virtue. This is therefore not an omission, but another way

of structuring thinking about the human being. Such concepts would later appear among the Roman Stoics, who would in turn inspire modern behavioral psychology.

Socrates focuses on *logos*, not on *pathos*. He chooses not to comment directly on the moods or emotions of his interlocutors, since his aim is to lead each person to reason, not to explore their states of soul. He does not seek to heal the psyche through affective introspection, but to purify thinking through rational examination. For him, passions are background noise, obstacles he does not treat directly but circumvents by confronting the individual with his contradictions.

By not directly naming affects, pride, fear, jealousy, and so on, Socrates adopts a strategy of indirect confrontation, less psychological yet more unsettling. He reveals the logical or moral flaw rather than denouncing a character trait. This compels the interlocutor to draw the connection between his affective posture and his rational incoherence. Pedagogically, this method is fruitful, for it rests on self-discovery rather than on accusation.

Finally, the Socratic perspective is fundamentally ethical: man is a moral being, and evil comes from ignorance of the good, not from unconscious impulses or inner disturbances. Thus, the causes of erroneous behavior are intellectual rather than psychological, an anthropology that is ethical rather than psychological. This paradigm clearly differs from that of Freud or even of some Stoics.

Thus, if Socrates does not speak in psychological terms, it is not out of ignorance or lack of intuition, but because he operates within an ethical and rational framework, centered on truth, virtue, and self-examination through

*logos*. It is therefore another way of conceiving the human being, not devoid of depth, but privileging refutation over interpretation.

Yet this Socratic posture, despite its demand for rigor and lucidity, may be experienced as aggression. For it brings about a brutal unveiling: it forces the interlocutor to recognize his flaws, abandon his certainties, and expose the fragile foundations of his opinions and states of mind. It offers no refuge in emotions, psychological justifications, or reassuring identities. In this way, it unsettles one's self-image and may provoke a sense of exposure, even of symbolic violence. By questioning relentlessly, refusing all complacency, and confronting the individual with himself, it shakes him out of his intellectual comfort zone. It does not console, it does not reassure: it shakes. And in an age where vulnerability is often overvalued, this face-to-face encounter with naked reason can be felt as an affront. Here lies the paradox of Socrates: he acts in the name of the care of the soul, but by means that may seem harsh. For he does not caress the soul, he forges it.

## PAIN

In our age, where sensitivity and the fear of victimization are often heightened, the *maieutic* method, bringing forth truths already latent within the mind, can be felt as violent. For this process is somewhat uncomfortable, since it means breaking certainties and challenging deeply rooted beliefs. Of course, such discomfort is not necessarily violent: it may simply be seen as a necessary step toward a clearer understanding of one's own ideas, even as a liberating and joyful activity. To compare this process to violence amounts to equating every intellectual or emotional discomfort with aggression, a point that remains open

to debate. Thus, if violence is defined broadly, to include symbolic or psychological forms, and if one takes into account the degree of individual sensitivity, then indeed certain aspects of the Socratic method might be described as containing a form of violence. Socrates' "authoritative" posture, even though grounded solely in reason, may be seen as a kind of intellectual control, accused of exerting psychological pressure, even humiliation, as some interlocutors experience it. And if one judges the practice primarily by its immediate effects, it undeniably induces a certain pain in the interlocutor, even if this may prove beneficial in the long run. After all, in contemporary medical terms, one does not hesitate to speak of the "violence" of a surgical procedure, yet its aim is ultimately the patient's well-being. In sociological or political terms, one may also say that every exercise of power entails some degree of violence, however minimal, an idea captured by Michel Foucault, who emphasized *micro-powers*. He showed that power is not limited to grand institutions, but unfolds in personal relations as well, where explicit or implicit forms of domination naturally arise, shaping how we perceive one another. In this sense, the rule of reason and the demand for self-examination that Socrates imposes can be judged arbitrary and alienating, and therefore painful, especially when the individual has neither asked for it nor given consent.

A common criticism of Socrates regarding pain concerns the question of consolation, that is, how he addresses the discomfort he so evidently provokes. For one may argue that Socrates does not console in the conventional sense: he does not seek to comfort emotions as a friend or therapist might, nor does he offer affective comfort. On the contrary, he may leave his interlocutors in a state of perplexity or frustration, without appearing troubled by it. Yet one might reply that he offers another kind of consolation, intellectual and moral, through truth itself. For Socrates, becoming aware of one's ignorance is

liberating, and thus beneficial. Certainly, there is no immediate comfort, but there is an invitation to reflect that ultimately brings calm to the soul. One could also say that he offers indirect consolation, through reason and by his own example, his equanimity, even in the face of death. The *maieutic* process is indeed painful, like childbirth, painful in the moment, yet leading to the "birth" of consciousness and truth. On this point, Socrates distinguishes between superficial well-being and genuine good: he prefers to disturb in order to awaken, rather than offer superficial reassurance that leaves one in error. Thus, Socrates does not console emotionally, but he does provide a philosophical consolation. In the short term, he may leave his interlocutors unsettled; but in the long term, he offers them a path toward wisdom. In this sense, his "consolation" is a challenge, an invitation to grow, rather than to remain complacent, not by infantilizing the subject, but, much like certain modern cognitive therapies, by confronting in order to heal.

## VULNERABILITY

In a certain sense, Socrates invites his interlocutors to see and acknowledge their weaknesses, blind spots, and contradictions, what may be called an acceptance of one's own vulnerability. One may then ask whether this amounts to manipulation, to a form of power, in weakening the person and making him admit to "just about anything". Let us therefore pause for a moment to examine the concept of vulnerability.

Vulnerability refers to the state of being exposed or sensitive to harm, to emotions, to criticism, to external influences, or to unforeseen events. It is the quality or condition of a person being open to the possibility of attack or injury,

whether physical or emotional. It points to what can be touched or is fragile in an individual, to what can be criticized or questioned in a person' s character, and thus to what is sensitive. Emotional vulnerability refers to the tendency to feel emotions such as fear, sadness, love, or joy intensely, even painfully, and to be affected by the words or actions of others. Psychological vulnerability designates either a general or temporary tendency to be highly sensitive to stress, anxiety, or uncertainty. Physical vulnerability refers to the fragility of our body in the face of illness, accidents, or aging. Social vulnerability implies an increased sensitivity to judgment, rejection, or inequality in interactions with others.

To recognize our vulnerability means to consciously accept that part of ourselves that is imperfect, fragile, sensitive, or limited, even to reconcile ourselves with it. On the emotional plane, it means identifying and accepting difficult feelings, fear, sadness, or anger, without denying or repressing them. On the psychological plane, it implies accepting our weaknesses, recognizing that we are neither invulnerable nor all-powerful. We have needs, fears, and limits, and this belongs to the human condition. It therefore represents an opening to the truth about oneself: that we are not always strong enough or able to face everything alone. Such acceptance can be liberating, as it drives us to seek support or to work on our weaknesses. Yet paradoxically, this recognition may become either a source of weakness or a source of strength, depending on how we receive and deal with it. By embracing our fragilities, we may become more authentic, more empathetic, and better equipped to face challenges. But we may also turn them into a way of victimizing ourselves. For when we see ourselves as suffering victims, we risk becoming passive, renouncing action, and waiting for solutions from outside instead of mobilizing our own resources. Enclosed in a posture of powerless victimhood, wronged by

fate, we complain or wait for outside solutions, rather than taking action. By contrast, if we actively accept our limits with honesty and courage, we can transform this recognition into motivation, into a powerful engine of personal change and inner growth. It means admitting that we are not perfect, that we have limits, and that we are influenced by our emotions and our environment. This awareness is not weakness but a step toward deeper self-knowledge, greater authenticity, and openness to others. Ultimately, vulnerability is what makes us profoundly human. Yet the essential work concerns our attitude toward our own finitude.

The question we may then ask in examining the Socratic function is whether the recognition of our vulnerability is a source of suffering and passivity, whether it makes us more open to manipulation by others, or whether it is a source of autonomy and power of being. The answer will largely depend on the context, on our degree of awareness of this vulnerability, and on the way we choose to handle this recognition.

When we recognize our vulnerability, emotional, psychological, social, or material, we become aware of our limits and unmet needs, which makes us more sensitive to external influences. This can create a “void” that others may exploit, whether intentionally or not. Recognizing our fragility can make us more sensitive to judgment or social pressure, through fear of being judged or rejected. “Manipulators” can exploit this fear in order to influence our decisions or compel us into certain behaviors. Acknowledging our vulnerability can make us more dependent on others’ approval or support, which often attracts “false validation” from seemingly “empathic” individuals who claim to want our good, whether sincerely or with hidden intent. Such dynamics create

asymmetrical relationships in which they hold power over us, if only by pretending to console.

Nevertheless, recognizing our vulnerability can also protect us, from others and from ourselves, and strengthen us. For greater self-understanding is an act of courage and lucidity. By knowing our weak points, we can take measures to protect or reinforce them, or simply learn to accept ourselves and develop better self-esteem. In accepting our vulnerability, we become more able to distinguish sincere relationships from toxic ones, more authentic toward ourselves and toward others. It makes us more resilient and rational, because such recognition urges us to ask for help, to learn new skills, or to adopt strategies for managing our emotions and weaknesses. We gain distance from ourselves and, in doing so, we learn to depend less on external approval. The more emotionally independent we are, the less we are subject to manipulation. By agreeing to see our limits, avoiding denial or complacency, we become more open to reality, strengthen our critical capacity, judge with greater freedom and less drama, and spare ourselves the excesses of paralyzing doubt.

At this stage, in order to better grasp Socrates' relation to vulnerability, the "way" he addresses it, it is necessary to contrast two conceptions of vulnerability.

The first, more widespread today, consists in sharing with others one's traumas, pains, or emotional wounds. The main concern is the expression of feelings, sincerity, and emotional transparency. It is about unveiling oneself in order to be understood or consoled, therefore not concealing. This vulnerability moves from the inside outward: one seeks the world's recognition and reception of one's inner drama. It implies the willingness to acknowledge and openly express one's wounds, struggles, pains, or fragility as a way of

connecting with others. It creates empathy and bonds through the mutual recognition of suffering. It rests on the idea that sharing pain lightens its weight, as in therapeutic approaches or life narratives, with a view to psychological and moral support.

The second conception consists in accepting existential “exposure”: being open to uncertainty, transformation, the loss of one’s self-image, or even the loss of life itself. It is an attitude of risk-taking that makes it possible to face challenges or confront difficult situations, whether an exacting dialogue, an important decision, or the confrontation with death. Here the orientation goes from the outside inward: one accepts reality and allows oneself to be transformed by it.

The aim of the first form is intimacy, connection, emotional safety. The aim of the second is integrity, truth, and growth. The first vulnerability consists in acknowledging that one is wounded and in sharing the pain; the second consists in accepting that one can be wounded, and in remaining serene before this possibility. Vulnerability then becomes a humble receptivity, the acceptance of one’s own capacity to be affected, an existential openness to uncertainty, criticism, or change, without defensive posture. It involves recognizing one’s limits, fallibility, fragility, the absence of protection or guarantees, and consequently a readiness to welcome the other, as an act of trust.

The first form is turned toward past or present wounds; it seeks to establish relational intimacy. The second examines future or possible “wounds”, with a view to fostering growth and strong relationships. One could also say they form a cycle: shared wounds teach humility, and humility allows the risking of new wounds. Or that they are two sides of the same coin, for example in the relation between a therapeutic process and the taking of responsibility, which

can reinforce each other. They may operate in turn, depending on circumstances. Nevertheless, distinguishing them helps to better understand how vulnerability operates in different contexts, according to people and their modes of expression.

It seems appropriate to call the first form, the “shared wound”, “weak vulnerability”, and the second, the “open acceptance”, what we may call “strong vulnerability”. Our aim is to show that Socrates primarily embodies this second form, more demanding and more empowering, centered on the power of reason, while most contemporary critics focus on the first, more psychological form, a gap that generates misunderstanding and unjust accusations against him.

The “shared wound” is passive and reactive in nature: it centers on existing pains, often in response to past traumas. It depends on others, for it demands validation or external support in order to heal, with the underlying risk of manipulation by “strong” individuals. Even when authentic, it can lock the individual into an identity of fragility, where the wound becomes an identity trait. It may engender a victim mindset or resentment. The qualifier “weak” here refers to an exposure lacking agency: vulnerability becomes a potential site of exploitation, as the individual is permeable to external influence.

In contrast, “open acceptance” is active or proactive: it acknowledges fragility without being reduced to it, it affirms a disposition to confront uncertainty or adversity. It is autonomous, rooted in humility and resilience; it can include acceptance of fate, the courage to accept imperfection, reconciliation with finitude. It is powerfully emancipatory, for it transforms vulnerability into a tool of learning and growth. This form of vulnerability is not a passive suffering, but an active choice to engage with one’s limits and uncertainties as an existential

catalyst. Even in fragility, fear, doubt, or exposure, the individual retains a freedom: that of deciding how to respond. It is a conscious and deliberate practice, transforming the individual or their situation. For example, using one's past mistakes to progress, instead of merely admitting and regretting them. In sum, strength lies in mobilizing vulnerability as a lever, rather than undergoing it: this makes it possible to resist manipulation through lucidity about oneself.

Nevertheless, one may ask whether a person must first receive sufficient "emotional nourishment" before finding the strength to move beyond weak vulnerability and enter into strong vulnerability. Perhaps this kind of radical, demanding philosophical dialogue is suitable only for a minority, those already strong enough to face questioning and challenge. Just as in order to practice a sport one must already be in good health. Many others, for various reasons, for lack of education or culture, or because of some trauma, may primarily need emotional support rather than being challenged, and may never be able to go further. Yet it seems to us that without this passage to "strong vulnerability", the human being will stagnate in a powerless, victimized condition, afraid of truly living; thus this "passage" appears indispensable to lead "a life worth living", to borrow Socrates' expression.

In summary, weak vulnerability is a condition, something one undergoes, whereas strong vulnerability is a practice, something one accomplishes. Socrates emphasizes the latter, centered in him on the power of reason, while contemporary critics focus mostly on the former, more oriented toward feeling, leading them to wrongly reproach him for neglecting individual vulnerability and for showing violence.

# LIBERATION OR MANIPULATION

Once we have seen that confronting our own weaknesses can go in two opposite directions, we must determine to what extent an incitement to confront our vulnerability is rather “healthy” or “unhealthy”, whether it results in another’s taking power over us or in greater autonomy for the subject. For this, it is essential to examine the intention behind such incitement, the context in which it occurs, and the effects it produces on us. Let us see how this can usually be determined.

First, the intention of the other: to assess whether it is benevolent or self-serving. In the first case, the person seeks to help us grow, to understand our own emotions, to strengthen our resilience and our power of reason. The aim is to support us, not to weaken us. Such a person respects our rhythm, our individuality, our free will. They do not push us further than we can or wish to go. A malicious person, by contrast, might exploit your vulnerability to gain a personal advantage, whether emotional, social, or material. The tone may be intrusive, pressing, or even guilt-inducing, without genuine concern for our well-being. Dialogues should take place in a setting where we feel safe, respected, and heard. Boundaries are respected, and we retain the choice to share, or not, what we feel or think. Theoretically, if we are urged to expose our weaknesses in a public, hostile, or asymmetrical setting, where the power relation is imbalanced and personal boundaries ignored, then this becomes questionable. A healthy dialogue implies that both parties share their vulnerabilities in a balanced way. No one is constantly the giver or the receiver. This reinforces trust and authenticity in the relationship.

If only one person is always the one exposing their vulnerability while the other remains distant or dominant, this may indicate an unhealthy imbalance. As for

the effects, we should feel strengthened, not weakened or diminished. We should feel gratitude or relief at the support received. If the incitement to confront your vulnerability leaves us anxious, humiliated, or even more fragile, it is a sign that the process was not healthy. In such cases one may feel a loss of self-confidence, even an increased dependence on the person who so incited us. Warning signs of an unhealthy incitement include excessive pressure, being forced to speak before we are ready, being ridiculed, having our confessions later used against us, or being encouraged to acknowledge our weaknesses without being given help or validation to overcome them.

Let us now consider Socrates under these aspects. When he invites his interlocutors to recognize their weaknesses and vulnerability, he is not seeking to manipulate them in the pejorative sense, but rather to awaken them to a fundamental truth about themselves. His method, though sometimes perceived as destabilizing, rests on a pedagogical and philosophical intention: to bring individuals to free themselves from their illusions so as to reach a better understanding of themselves and the world. He uses maieutics, a method consisting of insistent questioning to reveal contradictions or ignorance in his interlocutors. This approach can seem intrusive or even violent, for it forces individuals to confront their beliefs, certainties, and limits, without ever seeking or obtaining their consent, something they find outrageous. Those who have dared to practice such questioning know well the various manifestations of this indignation: “You want to change us with your questions when we asked nothing, we are fine as we are.” “Who do you think you are, wanting to change people?” “You are questioning me when I gave you no consent.” Such “abusive” questioning is likened almost to a violation. Yet this “violence” stems not from a desire to dominate or take advantage, but from a concern for truth and for intellectual and moral growth. In this sense,

Socrates acts more like a physician of the soul who, by exposing the invisible wounds of the mind, enables his patients to heal.

That said, some might interpret his insistence as a form of psychological manipulation. For example, when he ironically feigns ignorance or pushes his interlocutors into a corner until they become perplexed or embarrassed, he undeniably exerts a distressing form of control over their minds. Yet this "manipulation" is distinct from malicious practices: its purpose is not to serve Socrates' personal interests, but to awaken his interlocutors to their own potential and moral responsibility. Moreover, Socrates never imposes his own opinions. He merely guides others toward discovering truth for themselves. Acknowledging one's vulnerability under his direction then becomes a liberating act, not an alienating one. In showing our weaknesses, he helps us strengthen our critical judgment and build a more authentic and virtuous existence. Socrates seeks to enlighten, not to enslave; to instruct, not to exploit. Recognizing our vulnerability is not weakness but a crucial step toward wisdom and inner freedom.

But Socrates, or anyone who follows in his path, risks being caught up in the role of transforming others "for their own good", thereby claiming the nobler part for himself. It is true that the sharp criticisms he received in response to his questioning may well be signs of his non-complacency and integrity. A manipulative "master" typically makes sure he is loved and keeps consensus intact. Yet one might still ask whether Socrates was, in fact, pursuing his own interest in the dialogues. Certainly, he often claimed that he did not seek to impose his own opinions or to promote a personal agenda. But some critics have pointed out that his actions and behavior in the dialogues can appear to serve specific interests, intellectual, moral, or even social. For example, he

could be accused of wanting to prove his intellectual superiority, since, while pretending to be ignorant of the truth, he often ended up showing that his interlocutors were mistaken. Such a posture can be seen as a form of intellectual domination, or as a way of reinforcing his own position. Likewise, when Socrates discredits the sophists by showing that their arguments are empty or immoral, this could serve to promote his own vision of philosophy and of morality. He may well have sought to distinguish himself from other thinkers, like the sophists, and to gain a form of moral or intellectual prestige. And by refusing material rewards, adopting an austere way of life, Socrates presented himself as a model of virtue, which could also be seen as a strategy to acquire symbolic recognition.

On a more philosophical level, it is also possible to interpret the dialogues as reflecting a personal quest for truth on Socrates' part. Even if he denied having definitive answers, he seems profoundly engaged in an intellectual search that motivated him intrinsically. For example, in the *Phaedo*, Socrates expresses his joy at the thought of pursuing philosophy even after death, which shows that his passion for truth goes far beyond social or practical benefits. By posing incessant questions, Socrates was undoubtedly also seeking to deepen his own understanding, even if he claimed to act primarily for the good of others. By directing the dialogues with "oriented" questions, he could subtly guide his interlocutors toward predetermined conclusions, a possible form of manipulation intended to reinforce his own moral vision. The fact that he is often portrayed as a "guide" in the dialogues can give the impression that he occupies a position of power, even though he professes to be only a humble seeker of truth.

Thus, various interpretations are possible. A generous interpretation: Socrates acts above all for the common good, seeking to awaken his fellow citizens to truth and virtue without personal ulterior motives. A critical interpretation: Socrates might, consciously or unconsciously, pursue personal interests, whether reinforcing his own intellectual position, promoting a specific moral vision, or answering a personal quest for truth. One can also question the reality of Socrates as a historical figure faithful to his claims of humility, or as a literary construct by Plato serving broader philosophical aims.

In the following sections, we will show how Socrates transgresses several of the very characteristics outlined earlier, and respond to them.

## DISRESPECTFUL

Dialogue must respect our rhythm, our individuality, and our free will. The interlocutor should not push us further than we wish to go. One can respond to this criticism by examining the intention, the context, and the effects of Socrates' approach. For indeed, the Socratic method can seem intrusive or coercive: it forces interlocutors to confront their contradictions until they acknowledge their ignorance, a process that can feel uncomfortable or even humiliating for some, as illustrated in Plato's dialogues. He insists with his interlocutors even when they show signs of resistance or embarrassment. In this sense, Socrates seems to ignore the individual rhythm and free will of his interlocutors, since he pushes them to think beyond what they consider necessary or comfortable. However, Socrates never imposes his own ideas or conclusions. He simply guides his interlocutors toward the autonomous discovery of truth. His method is based on questions, not on authoritarian

assertions. Thus, although Socrates pushes his interlocutors to reflect more deeply, he does not force them to adopt a particular position.

Next, Socrates considers that most people live in the illusion of knowing, which prevents them from making moral and intellectual progress. His insistence aims to break these illusions so that they can gain a better understanding of themselves and the world, something that inevitably generates resistance. This process is therefore not a violation of free will but an invitation to break free from one's own limitations. Socrates firmly believes that the search for truth and virtue is a moral imperative. As a philosopher, he feels invested with a divine mission to awaken consciences and incite others to philosophize. In *The Apology*, he even states that he prefers to die rather than stop questioning his fellow citizens, since this would mean betraying his mission. His "insistence" is therefore motivated by an ethical concern, not by a desire for domination.

Moreover, even though Socrates presses his interlocutors, his dialogues remain fundamentally interactive. Participants always retain the possibility to respond, to contest, or to withdraw from the dialogue. In *The Symposium*, Alcibiades openly expresses both his admiration and his frustrations toward Socrates, showing that the relationship remains dynamic rather than one-sided. The dialogical framework ensures that the interlocutor remains active in the process, even if Socrates plays a more directive role. Furthermore, he often adapts his approach depending on his interlocutor. For example, he uses metaphors or simple examples with those less familiar with philosophy, such as the slave in the *Meno*. With sophists or politicians, he adopts a more provocative tone, knowing they are able to follow complex reasoning. He resorts to a sharper style with stubborn or proud individuals who require a more forceful confrontation.

Despite the initial discomfort, the Socratic method can lead to a positive transformation. Recognizing one's ignorance or contradictions can be liberating and open the way to deeper reflection. Socrates' disciples, like Plato, often described these moments of confrontation as decisive stages of their philosophical development. However, indeed, some interlocutors feel anger, shame, or frustration in response to Socrates' insistence. These reactions show that his method is not suitable for everyone and that it can sometimes be perceived as violent or disrespectful. Or one may suppose that, despite rejection and anger, the positive effect is not lessened: an awareness nevertheless takes place, even if not immediately but only over time.

On the surface, Socrates seems to transgress the rules of propriety by pushing his interlocutors past their comfort zone. Yet this apparent transgression is justified by his pedagogical, ethical, and liberating intention. He does not seek to impose his ideas, but to help others access a truth they already carry within themselves, to reveal themselves to themselves. Ultimately, Socrates embodies a form of philosophical radicality which, though demanding, is guided by a deep concern for truth and the common good.

## INTRUSIVE

The tone may strike as intrusive, insistent, or even guilt-inducing, with little concern for our well-being.

This criticism is often voiced by those who find his method too provocative or destabilizing. Again, one may respond by referring to his intention, his educational role, and the long-term effects of his dialogue. Socrates does not seek to humiliate or guilt-trip his interlocutors for personal pleasure or to

assert intellectual superiority. On the contrary, he acts out of the conviction that the search for truth and virtue is essential for both individual and collective well-being: he believed he had been sent by the god Apollo to shake the Athenians out of their intellectual and moral lethargy. His insistence stems from a genuine concern for their souls, since he believes ignorance is a form of misfortune. His role is not to make his interlocutors immediately happy, but in the long run to help them free themselves from illusions that hinder their spiritual growth. Unlike a manipulator or an authoritarian preacher, Socrates often adopts a humble posture, even if feigned. He claims ignorance of the answers to the problems raised, in order to incite his interlocutors to seek truth themselves, thus reducing the risk of direct guilt-induction, since ignorance or error is a "normal" state. Rather than explicitly saying "You are wrong", he leads his interlocutor through questions to see his own mistakes, which softens the guilt-inducing effect.

The Socratic method rests on the idea that awareness requires a certain discomfort. To grow intellectually and morally, it is often necessary to confront difficult truths. Like a physician who diagnoses a serious illness and may seem harsh in announcing the truth, his intention is curative. In the same way, Socrates provokes a salutary shock to heal the soul of his interlocutors. If his tone seems intrusive or pressing, it is because he wants to break the inner resistances that prevent his interlocutors from making progress. This process may be difficult, but it is not meant to harm. Moreover, although Socrates insists on certain points, he never forces his interlocutors to accept his conclusions. They always retain the freedom to reject his arguments or leave the discussion. Unlike an interrogation or a hostile confrontation, Socratic dialogues unfold in a relatively respectful setting. Often, when tension arises, it stems more from the interlocutor, since Socrates himself remains quite even-

tempered. Even if his tone can feel insistent, it remains benevolent and draws his interlocutors in a shared exploration. For instance, in the *Meno*, Socrates works with a slave to help him discover mathematical truths. He does not treat him as an object of study, but as an active partner in the search for truth. With young men like Theaetetus, he adopts a gentler, more encouraging tone, while with sophists like Callicles, who are more vain, he becomes sharper in order to dismantle their arguments.

Although Socrates' tone may at times seem guilt-inducing, his aim is to free his interlocutors from the chains of ignorance and false belief. Recognizing one's weaknesses or contradictions can be a liberating step, even if initially uncomfortable. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates explains that philosophy is an exercise in mortification of the ego and superficial desires, ultimately leading to a more authentic and virtuous life. Socrates' disciples, such as Plato, often described these moments of confrontation as crucial stages in their philosophical development. They saw in him not an accuser, but a guide toward a better life.

On the surface, Socrates' tone may seem intrusive, pressing, or even guilt-inducing. Yet this perception must be understood within the context of his deeper intention: he seeks to awaken his interlocutors to a truth that will make them better and freer. Although his approach may provoke initial discomfort, it is driven by a sincere concern for their spiritual and moral well-being. While some may find his method too demanding or provocative, it is important to recognize that it aims to shake consciences and open the path to positive transformation. Despite the stormy turns of dialogue, Socrates remains guided by a deep concern for truth and human growth.

# DISTURBING

Dialogues are ideally meant to unfold in an environment where one feels safe, respected, and heard. But with Socrates, this is not quite the case. He often imposes himself on his interlocutors, without warning and with little regard for context.

First, one must take into account the historical setting. Social norms in antiquity were different from ours. In ancient Greece, philosophical dialogue did not always take place in a formal or secure framework as it might today. Public discussions were frequent, often improvised, and could occur anywhere, in the agora, in the gymnasium, or at a banquet, often catching people off guard. In *The Apology*, Socrates explains that he questioned people in public places, without appointments or protocol. These improvised interactions, though sometimes disconcerting, were consistent with the culture of the time, where intellectual confrontation was valued as a test of virtue and wisdom. In the gymnasium, for instance, one naturally finds a parallel between exercises of physical wrestling and intellectual sparring, where opponents challenged each other in front of the group. Likewise, at the banquets of the elite, the pleasures of food and wine blended seamlessly with the pleasures of the intellect.

From Socrates' standpoint, it is worth recalling that he saw his mission as "urgent". He believed firmly that he had been divinely charged with awakening the Athenian conscience. This conviction gave him a "right" that transcended social conventions. His famous metaphor of the "gadfly", the moral obligation to rouse his fellow citizens from their lethargy, justifies his unsolicited and forceful intrusions into conversation. He was animated by a profound concern for his interlocutors: he helped them uncover their ignorance or contradictions

in order to lead them toward a better understanding of themselves. For him, this was a necessity, an imperative outweighing the comfort of the individual.

Indeed, Socrates did not aim to guarantee a safe or comfortable environment for his interlocutors, since he believed that confronting ignorance and contradictions was necessary for progress. In the *Gorgias*, for example, Socrates confronts Callicles with his moral contradictions, provoking anger and frustration. Yet this clash is meant to free Callicles from his illusions. Temporary discomfort is, for Socrates, the unavoidable condition of positive transformation. Still, even if he imposed himself without warning, he implicitly respected his interlocutors' boundaries by leaving them free to reject his arguments or walk away, something that did, in fact, happen from time to time.

## ASYMMETRY

When we are pushed to expose our weaknesses in an asymmetric or aggressive relationship, where the balance of power is uneven and personal boundaries are ignored, criticism is justified.

As already noted, Socrates lived in a different historical and cultural context. In ancient Greece, social norms and expectations around interaction were unlike ours. Public debate and intellectual confrontation were valued as ways to test virtue, wisdom, and competence. The sophists, often Socrates' rivals, engaged in public debates where arguments were delivered without restraint. Such exchanges could be brutal, yet they were part of Athenian culture. Though uncomfortable by modern standards, public exposure of one's weaknesses was not only accepted but expected in philosophical or political settings. Concepts familiar to us today, respect for psychological boundaries, emotional

protection, intimacy, did not hold the same weight. Individuals were encouraged to defend their views publicly, even if that meant revealing their flaws. Socrates questioned citizens in public not out of malice but because he believed truth-seeking was a collective matter, a concern of the polis, not of private life.

It is true that the Socratic method is structurally asymmetric: the questioner appears to hold the power. Socrates rarely asked for explicit consent; he proceeded as if his interlocutor's agreement were self-evident or irrelevant. Yet he did not exploit this asymmetry to dominate or affirm his superiority. His intent was to reveal hidden truths and stimulate critical reflection, for what he considered an ethical mission, not an act of control. Still, one may accuse him of seeking another's "good" against their will. Importantly, Socrates often confronted powerful figures, politicians, sophists, generals, precisely those most reluctant to show vulnerability. By pressing them, he exposed the fragility behind authority and insisted that truth and virtue were essential for both personal and collective well-being.

That said, power imbalances could indeed turn oppressive. In pushing his interlocutors, Socrates risked humiliating them and reinforcing the asymmetry he sought to challenge. Was he aware of this? Did he simply choose to overlook it in light of his "divine mission"? In any case, he seemed largely unmoved by anger or frustration when interlocutors felt cornered or ridiculed. He pressed on, apparently insensitive to their emotional discomfort. By today's standards, this insensitivity to personal boundaries and emotional reactions is problematic.

In his defense, one might emphasize that Socrates questioned more than he asserted, and he primarily targeted those who relied on authority of speech

rather than truth. His interlocutors were always free to reject his arguments or walk away, indeed, some did. At times, he even offered to switch roles, inviting others to question him, though this invitation rarely met success. For questioning requires humility, genuine interest in the other's thought, and courage, qualities not easily embraced by those invested in defending their image or beliefs.

If Socrates indeed takes the initiative in questioning, it is less an act of domination than a pedagogical method, one that stems not from sheer subjectivity but from a certain technique. In this sense, the activity is not purely "personal". Moreover, his declared aim is to bring forth the minds of others, not to rule over them. His role is not to dominate or manipulate, but to help his interlocutors reach a better understanding of themselves and of the world, to guide them toward discovering truth for themselves, and to teach them to challenge their own beliefs. Such an approach is hardly comprehensible to those who view discourse as self-assertion and therefore as an act of power. In addition, Socrates consistently acknowledges his ignorance, an attitude that drives him to question rather than to affirm, distancing him from traditional authority. In doing so, he constantly exposes his own vulnerability in a particular way. By declaring his ignorance, he presents himself as a seeker, not a possessor of knowledge. At the same time, he shows himself willing to expose his convictions publicly, even at the risk of his life, thereby revealing an existential vulnerability of the highest order. This might appear contradictory, simultaneously "to question" and "to affirm", but Socrates questions opinions, not the principles that ground his method. He doubts what he thinks he knows, but he affirms the value of truth-seeking, justice, and self-examination. These are methodological and ethical commitments, not dogmas, and he defends

them even to the point of death, as shown in *The Apology*. Paradoxically, to question does not exclude firmly believing in the importance of questioning.

Socrates does not evade criticism. In several dialogues, for instance, in the *Gorgias*, with Callicles, his interlocutors attack him harshly, and he calmly engages with these criticisms. He does not fear them; they interest him. In this sense, he does not set himself above others with moral or intellectual superiority. Furthermore, his method is entirely reversible, as he occasionally suggests, though few dare to turn it against him. For to question in this way requires genuine interest in the other and trust in them. His approach aims at equality in the examination of ideas. And if the exchange seems asymmetric, it may be because Socrates has already carried out on himself the same process of interrogation that he now invites others to undergo. His death ultimately bears witness to his vulnerability before established power. By refusing to abandon his philosophical mission, he accepts condemnation rather than compromise his principles. Thus, the apparent asymmetry of the Socratic method may be less a refusal to expose his own vulnerability than an invitation to a shared journey toward truth, one along which Socrates has already taken certain steps.

Although Socrates does not explicitly reveal personal confessions, he nonetheless exposes an implicit form of vulnerability. His avowal of ignorance is itself an acknowledgment of intellectual fragility. This humility is a kind of vulnerability, though expressed indirectly. Moreover, the radicality of his questioning entails a genuine risk, as shown by the hostility he repeatedly provokes. To carry out such a mission without faltering reveals a great acceptance of his own limits, an intensified form of humility. His whole life is marked by existential vulnerability: he chooses to remain faithful to his

principles, even at the cost of death. Nor does Socrates conceal any “dark” agenda, he makes no secret of his aim to provoke reflection in his interlocutors. He acts transparently and not manipulatively, which weakens the claim that he sought hidden power. One may also argue that the apparent asymmetry in Socratic dialogues is pedagogically necessary. In any teaching relationship, there is often an asymmetry between guide and learner. This does not mean the guide seeks domination, but that he assumes a particular role to foster the other’s progress. And by exposing contradictions, Socrates does not aim to humiliate but to free his interlocutors from illusion and encourage them toward truth. To be sure, the criticism that Socrates exercises power by questioning while not openly revealing his own vulnerability contains some truth. Yet the asymmetry in his dialogues may be seen as a temporary necessity, designed to help his interlocutors move forward.

## FRAGILIZATION

If the incitement to confront your vulnerability leaves us anxious, humiliated, or even more fragile, when we are encouraged to acknowledge our weaknesses without receiving help or validation to overcome them, it is a sign that the process is unhealthy.

Certainly, this criticism points to an important limit of the Socratic method: Socrates does not always provide solutions or immediate comfort after exposing the contradictions or ignorance of his interlocutors. This can give the impression that he abandons them in their fragility. One could accuse him of leaving people in a state of unresolved skepticism, an aporetic condition that provokes anxiety. Thus, in the *Meno*, Socrates helps a slave discover a

mathematical truth, but he does not necessarily offer him emotional validation or support to overcome the initial shock of his own ignorance. One might suggest that “Socratic consolation” rests mainly on strengthening the power of reason, rather than on an emotional or empathetic approach in the contemporary common sense. This perspective is characteristic of Socrates’ method and philosophy, which emphasizes the virtue of reason as a source of inner healing, liberation, and well-being.

For Socrates, reason is the supreme means of accessing truth, wisdom, and virtue. He firmly believes that human troubles, such as anxieties, fears, and frustrations, stem mainly from ignorance or false beliefs. In *The Apology*, he affirms that “evil comes from ignorance”, which means that rationally understanding the truth allows one to overcome moral suffering. Socratic consolation therefore consists in leading the individual toward a clearer understanding of himself and the world, so that he may transcend his fears or illusions through the power of reason. Thus, rather than offering immediate emotional comfort, such as soothing words or empathetic listening, Socrates seeks to heal deeper sufferings by addressing their intellectual and philosophical causes. For example, in the *Phaedo*, while condemned to death, Socrates does not try to calm his friends with kind words, but by rationally explaining why death is not to be feared by the one who lives virtuously. Unlike a modern psychological support approach, where a person’s emotions are validated to help them feel heard, Socrates does not dwell on immediate emotional aspects. He considers that emotions are often irrational and must be disciplined by reason. When an interlocutor expresses anger or frustration in response to his questions, Socrates does not seek to appease these emotions but rather to transform them into critical reflection. Socratic consolation rests on the idea that true liberation comes from self-knowledge and the

understanding of fundamental truths. By rationally understanding that certain fears or sufferings are unjustified, the individual finds a form of inner peace. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates explains that the fear of death or suffering is often irrational, as it rests on erroneous beliefs. By becoming aware of these beliefs and deconstructing or modifying them, the individual can find lasting consolation.

Moreover, for Socrates, virtue, moral excellence, is intimately tied to reason. To live virtuously is to live in accordance with reason, which naturally leads to a state of inner well-being. In the *Meno*, Socrates explains that virtue is a form of knowledge, and that he who knows what is good will necessarily act justly and happily. The Socratic consolation therefore consists in helping the individual cultivate virtue through reason, which makes him more resilient in the face of life's difficulties. This approach may seem austere or difficult, for it demands constant intellectual and moral effort. However, Socrates believes that this discipline is necessary to achieve true inner peace. In *The Symposium*, Alcibiades describes Socrates as a man capable of resisting immediate pleasures thanks to his mastery of reason, which allows him to remain serene even in difficult situations. This explains his equanimity, a permanent regulation of emotions. Contemporary emotional consolation, that of a friend or a therapist, is based on listening, empathy, and the validation of emotions. It seeks to soothe suffering immediately by offering emotional support, for example, saying to someone, "I understand your pain", or "You have the right to be sad", in order to help them feel less alone. Socratic consolation, on the other hand, does not seek to calm emotions immediately. It rather aims to transform negative emotions into rational understanding and virtuous action.

Thus, Socratic consolation is carried out mainly by strengthening in the individual the power of reason, rather than by a common emotional approach. This method may seem distant or rigid according to our modern standards, but it rests on a profoundly optimistic vision of the human being: by cultivating reason and virtue, we can transcend our sufferings and attain lasting inner peace. Socratic consolation is not a simple immediate response to emotions, but a path toward intellectual and moral transformation that offers true and lasting consolation.

Thus, although the confrontation with our weaknesses may be uncomfortable, Socrates considers it a necessary step to attain a greater understanding of oneself and of the world. For him, temporary discomfort is the price to pay for an intellectual and moral transformation. In *The Apology*, he explains that philosophy is an exercise in the mortification of the ego and of superficial desires, which may be difficult but ultimately leads to a more authentic life. Socrates does not seek to humiliate or weaken his interlocutors for personal pleasure or to assert his superiority. His aim is to help them free themselves from their illusions and progress toward virtue and wisdom. He often compares his method to that of a physician of the soul, who must sometimes cause momentary pain in order to heal a deeper wound. Certainly, a disciple of Socrates may feel discouraged or intimidated by the rigor of his questions, rather than motivated to seek the truth. But this remains a personal decision, and Socrates encourages his interlocutor to engage and to persevere in the process of reflection; he does not abandon him, or rarely does so, for he is tenacious, and in this sense he provides a kind of steady psychological support.

# FREEDOM OF SPEECH

In Plato's dialogues and other accounts of Socrates, some interlocutors complain or express frustration about the way Socrates conducts discussions. For example, in *Protagoras*, the latter criticises Socrates for imposing his method of brief questions and short answers: "You want to force me to answer like you, with little yeses and nos, when an honest discussion requires elaboration. You seek to dominate me like a child, and I do not want to be treated that way." Indeed, Socrates does not "discuss"; he questions in order to constrain, trapping his opponent's argument within its own premises, and his demand for rigour is experienced as a deprivation of dialogical freedom. These complaints can therefore be interpreted as a form of resentment toward what is perceived as a limitation of their freedom of speech. However, these criticisms are not explicitly formulated in terms of "freedom of speech" in the modern sense, but rather as objections to the Socratic method and his insistence on pushing his interlocutors to think more deeply rather than to express themselves or declaim. Reason takes precedence over speech, an exacting regulation which, for some, may represent a kind of violence.

Consider first the principle of the "Socratic filters", also called the "test of the three sieves", a method of discernment attributed to Socrates, though its exact origin is not attested in the ancient texts. This method consists in subjecting speech to three criteria before sharing it: truth, goodness, and usefulness. If the content of the speech does not meet these three criteria, it is preferable not to share it. This principle encourages thoughtful and responsible communication, aiming to avoid the spread of unfounded, vain, or harmful remarks. Although it is quite "reasonable" and relevant, such a principle can easily be perceived as censorship or prohibition, since it already raises the

question of who, when, and how these abstract criteria will be applied, something that runs counter to the more popular and easygoing principle of spontaneity, so fashionable today. Thus, when Socrates “takes power”, he uses a dialectical technique that consists of asking apparently simple questions, deconstructing the answers of his interlocutors to reveal contradictions or flaws in their reasoning. He interrupts the natural flow of conversation, the usual back-and-forth where one speaks as they please, often talking over one another or interrupting arbitrarily. This approach can easily seem humiliating or discouraging for those unprepared for such a level of intellectual rigor. For example, Socrates “paralyzes” his interlocutors by forcing them to recognize their ignorance. Some may feel that Socrates does not give them the space to express their opinions freely, since he constantly intervenes to contradict or correct them. Instead of simply listening, he pushes them to justify every assertion, which can seem oppressive. In *The Apology*, Socrates explains that his aim is not to silence speech but to stimulate critical thinking. A posture opposed to that of the sophists, who valued eloquence and the ability to persuade even when arguments were not necessarily based on truth, and who thus felt “restrained” by this approach, since it limited their skill in impressing through flamboyant speech. Socrates rejects the idea that speech should be used solely to convince or manipulate. For him, true freedom of speech lies in the search for truth, even if this means acknowledging one’s own errors. For truth is a breath, a process, an unattainable ideal, and not a specific idea, since any particular idea is only ever an approximation, an ephemeral conjecture, as Nicholas of Cusa would later write, or a “provisional morality”, as Descartes would later call it. This is the very problem of “reminiscence” in Socrates, a kind of return to “the origin”, an unattainable transcendence of which we only ever

grasp fragments, a finitude that is better accepted. A principle entirely out of step with the rhetorical patterns of the time.

In ancient Greece, the notion of freedom of speech, *parrhesia*, was important, but it was associated with frankness and sincerity rather than with absolute freedom of expression. Socrates embodied this idea by encouraging his interlocutors to speak honestly, while pushing them to take responsibility for their statements. This consists in deconstructing their assertions until they admit they do not know what they thought they knew, which is inevitable. Some interlocutors could perceive this demand as an obstacle to their freedom of speech, since they were compelled to justify their remarks instead of simply stating them. They perceived this approach as a form of intellectual intimidation or a way of depriving them of confidence in their own ideas. For Socrates, true freedom lies in the ability to think independently and on solid grounds, and to question one's own beliefs. Thus, far from stifling speech, he seeks to free his interlocutors from prejudice and illusion.

Thus, some of Socrates' interlocutors do indeed express frustration at his interrogative method, which seems restrictive or discouraging to them. However, these criticisms reflect more a discomfort with confronting their own intellectual limits than the suppression of their freedom of expression. For Socrates, freedom of speech is not simply the right to say whatever one wants, but the ability to sincerely seek truth through dialogue and critical examination.

The Socratic method often relies on closed questions that force interlocutors to choose between two simplistic options, for example, "Is it true or false?" He imposes binary answers of the "yes or no" type. This methodological rigidity, which obliges the interlocutor to clarify or to take a stance, can be experienced as artificial or constraining. For example, in the *Gorgias*, Gorgias, a sophist

famous for his eloquence, seems frustrated by Socrates' precise questions, which limit his ability to develop nuanced arguments. He would obviously prefer to improvise a flowing discourse rather than respond to systematic interrogation. Interlocutors more accustomed to free rhetoric or sophistic eloquence find this approach restrictive and ill-suited to their style of communication. Not to mention that at the end of the dialogue, Socrates often concludes without providing a clear solution to the problem posed, which adds to the sense of absurdity and unease.

Moreover, Socrates tends to explore the definitions of terms and to play with linguistic ambiguities. This can seem pedantic or needlessly complex to those who prefer practical discussions that go straight to the point. He plays with words and concepts. For example, in the *Euthyphro*, when Socrates asks Euthyphro to define piety, he critiques every attempt at a definition by showing its logical flaws, and Euthyphro eventually gives up, frustrated by the impossibility of satisfying Socrates. Some interlocutors may see this obsession with nuance and this constant "game" of thinking as needlessly complicating things; they feel stifled by these "idle" exchanges instead of enjoying them. A large part of the Socratic method consists in exposing the internal contradictions in his interlocutors' reasoning and the flaws in their statements. Although this may be useful philosophically, it can seem accusatory or embarrassing. For example, in the *Protagoras*, Protagoras, a renowned sophist, is irritated when Socrates exposes the inconsistencies in his arguments. Rather than simply listening or accepting Protagoras' opinions, or even contradicting him, Socrates insists on examining them from every angle, which Protagoras takes as a personal attack, even as ridicule.

In this way, in some dialogues, Socrates dominates the discussion by constantly posing questions without leaving much room for his interlocutors to freely express their own ideas. For example, in the *Ion*, Ion, a rhapsode, a reciter of poetry, tries to speak of his expertise in interpreting Homeric poems, but Socrates quickly takes control of the conversation and redirects it toward philosophical questions, which greatly displeases him. This "domination"strikes his interlocutors as a restriction of their freedom of expression, or as a way of diverting the conversation from their initial concerns. Moreover, by encouraging his interlocutors to think critically, Socrates often challenges established beliefs and social norms, which is experienced as a threat to social order or to moral authorities, as an attack on their identity or on their freedom to believe in what they hold important.

Complaints about Socrates' way of dialoguing thus reflect a frustration with his insistence on pushing his interlocutors to think rigorously and critically. His methods seem humiliating, restrictive, or destabilizing to those unaccustomed to such a level of intellectual scrutiny. Yet this also highlights the effectiveness of his method in stimulating critical thinking and encouraging the pursuit of truth.

# TRUST AND MISTRUST

## THE TRUST OF SOCRATES

The problem of trust in Socratic practice is central, on several levels: Socrates' trust in his interlocutor, the interlocutor's trust in Socrates, and trust in reason itself. These three dimensions are closely linked and constitute the necessary

foundations for the Socratic dialogue to take place and produce meaning. At the heart of the Socratic project lies a profound trust in human reason. Socrates believes that truth is accessible through reason: despite errors and illusions, human beings can, through critical reflection and dialogue, approach moral or intellectual truth. Reason is capable of challenging received opinions: Socrates embodies this work of critical stripping-down by questioning his contemporaries' certainties about fundamental concepts such as virtue, justice, courage, etc. Reason leads to the good: according to an idea strongly present in Platonic dialogues, no one does evil voluntarily, but always out of ignorance. Therefore, if one truly understands what the good is, one will naturally consent to it. Reason thus leads not only to truth, but also to morality and fulfillment. However, this trust can be undermined when reasoning fails or contradicts itself, leading to misology, hatred of reason, which Socrates denounces in the *Phaedo* as a dangerous drift. He warns against rejecting reason out of disappointment, stressing that the fault lies not in reason itself but in its misuse.

Socratic practice thus rests on a threefold trust: in the other, in oneself, and in reason. This trust is fragile, because the Socratic dialogue confronts the interlocutor with his own limits. But it is precisely this trial that makes inner transformation possible. Without this trust, dialogue falls flat; with it, it becomes a path toward intellectual and moral freedom. Yet the issue of trust in Socratic practice reveals a fundamental tension at the heart of philosophy. This practice rests on a paradox: it requires trust and its systematic questioning at the same time.

Socrates shows strong initial trust in the ability of his interlocutors to reach truth by themselves. This trust is expressed in his conviction that the human soul possesses a latent knowledge which interrogation can bring to light, this is

the theory of recollection illustrated in the *Meno*. By refusing to give direct answers, Socrates demonstrates deep faith in the intellectual resources of the other. However, this trust comes with systematic distrust of unexamined opinions. Socrates trusts the person while distrusting his initial certainties. He believes in his interlocutor's ability to overcome prejudices, but only at the cost of rigorous critical work, beginning with confrontation with oneself. Only rational examination can distinguish true from false, just from unjust. This critical trust is expressed in the Socratic conviction that "the unexamined life is not worth living." The "I know that I know nothing" expresses this tension: trust in the rational method, but humility in the face of the vastness of what remains to be discovered. This trust in reason coexists with the recognition of the limits of human knowledge.

The initial trust in his interlocutors is for Socrates both a condition and a goal of dialogue. This is manifested notably by the absence of immediate negative judgment: he does not consider the other ignorant and stupid from the outset, he sees him as a rational being. He listens, questions, and assumes that anyone can access truth by himself and wishes to do so. Through maieutics, he believes that every human being has an innate capacity to discover truth, provided he is guided by adequate questions, for without such stimulation the mind tends to grow numb. His stance is humble and interrogative: by claiming "to know nothing", he shows that he does not place himself in the position of master, but as an equal partner in the search for truth, he creates the conditions of safety necessary for genuine intellectual exchange.

Nevertheless, one may wonder whether this trust of Socrates in his interlocutors and their capacity for reason is unconditional and unshakable. Does he sometimes lose confidence in them, or does he always continue as if

nothing had happened, despite contrary evidence? In Plato's dialogues, he does indeed begin his discussions with a form of methodological trust: he assumes that his interlocutors are capable of reasoning, of seeking truth with him, and that their opinions deserve to be examined, but it seems that this trust has its limits: it is strategic and pedagogical, not unconditional, though he always tries as much as possible to maintain the dialogue. Indeed, he can observe bad faith, confusion, or rigidity in his interlocutors. And in some cases, when they flee the dialogue or lock themselves in pride, he seems disappointed or irritated, sometimes with irony, sometimes with frankness.

For example, in the *Gorgias*, Socrates confronts Callicles, whose positions become increasingly brutal and incoherent. He persists in discussing with him but seems to lose hope of true openness of mind and real progress. Thus he shifts from dialogue to a form of monologue, continuing the reasoning alone, asking questions to which he answers himself. He says explicitly: "Since you won't answer or listen, I will go on talking to myself." This moment is crucial: Socrates transforms the dialogue into a discourse no longer addressed to Callicles, but to third-party listeners present on stage, or to Plato's reader, in a theatrical way. His tone becomes more ironic and bitter. Whereas Socrates usually maintains a tone of humility or gentle irony, facing Callicles he sometimes becomes more serious, somewhat biting. He reproaches him for his incoherence and bad faith. This reveals disillusionment: he no longer seeks to convince Callicles, but to preserve the truth in spite of him. And at the end of the dialogue, Socrates affirms that the true goal of philosophy is to prepare for death and to purify one's soul through justice. He no longer addresses Callicles except nominally, and asserts his own position with solemnity, almost as a testament: "For I, Callicles, as I often say, strive to be, not to seem, a good man." He withdraws into a concern for own self, in a kind of ethical

monologue, because dialogue has become impossible. Despite this, Socrates does not abruptly break off the dialogue: he redirects it to a broader audience and maintains the demand of the *logos*. In the desert of bad faith, he turns the discussion into an indirect demonstration.

In this sense, one can say that he trusts reason more than individuals. For he thinks that truth is accessible through rigorous examination, but he also knows that few accept to go all the way. He knows that pride, ignorance, and habit are powerful obstacles.

But he continues to provoke, deconstruct, and spur on, even without assurance of success. When the immediate interlocutor becomes a wall, Socrates speaks "beyond" him. Thus, even when trust in the individual weakens, trust in the value of questioning persists. In this lies his radicality as a philosopher: he never renounces dialogue, even with those in whom he no longer truly believes, while transforming the dynamic.

Another interesting strategy is with Alcibiades, who reproaches Socrates for avoiding him, no longer speaking to him, even fleeing him, while he loved him, admired him, and sought his company. This can be called a strategy of sublimating desire: he does not want reciprocal love in the worldly sense, but seeks to awaken in Alcibiades the desire for truth and the Good, that is, a philosophical love, oriented toward what elevates, not toward what flatters. He wants to arouse lack as the driving force of philosophical desire. By withdrawing, by remaining silent, Socrates frustrates Alcibiades, but not out of cruelty, it is a pedagogical method. This could be called a negative maieutics of absence: desire is born from absence, not possession. By eluding him, he forces Alcibiades to question himself, to feel the gap between what he is and what he would like to be. He provokes an emptiness that drives inner inquiry. For

Socrates understands that Alcibiades, despite his intelligence and beauty, is still captive to political ambition, the desire for power, recognition, and domination. Here we can see a form of moral discernment: Socrates does not trust blindly, especially when he senses that the other's reason is not guided by an authentic desire for truth.

By refusing to speak to someone who wants to seduce him for base reasons, Socrates affirms that knowledge is not given to those who wish to use it for personal or reductive ends. He protects knowledge and protects himself, refusing to corrupt the philosophical bond. By practicing an asceticism of soul and language, he both practices and provokes a radical form of self-mastery, for he refuses to let himself be carried away by passions that could distort the search for truth. His silence or distancing is not affective rejection, but a demanding ethical stance: he teaches only those ready to be transformed, and remains silent before pride or superficiality. When Socrates avoids Alcibiades and ceases to speak to him, it is not indifference or personal contempt, but a philosophical strategy aimed at awakening the other rather than satisfying his impulses, in order to protect truth from passionate distortions. It is a form of gentle violence, but oriented toward awakening the desire for wisdom. It is, in fact, a way of respecting Alcibiades more than Alcibiades respects himself. Thus one may say that Socrates' trust in reason is unshakable, it is the voice of truth, but his trust in individuals' capacity for reason and integrity is shaped by circumstances.

Socrates is not naïve about the limits of his enterprise. He knows how to recognize when an interlocutor is not ready for serious dialogue, or worse, when he might be corrupt or corrupting. What emerges from various examples is that the Socratic practice requires more than a mere willingness to converse: it presupposes a moral disposition, good faith, openness to questioning, and a

disinterested pursuit of the good and truth. When these conditions are not met, trust breaks down or never arises. And this sets an important limit to the Socratic project: no dialogue is possible without mutual trust, grounded in a shared pursuit of truth. Thus, if trust is at the heart of Socratic practice, it is never given once and for all. It can be weakened, challenged, or even withdrawn when the intentions or dispositions of dialogue partners stray too far from the philosophical project. Trust in Socrates is therefore critical, conditional, and dynamic: it is built within dialogue, but it can also erode there if one of the protagonists abandons the quest for the good and truth.

## THE TRUST OF THE INTERLOCUTORS

On the side of the interlocutors, the situation is more complex. The Socratic method paradoxically requires them to place their trust in someone who openly claims to know nothing and who systematically leads them into aporia. For the Socratic dialogue to work, the interlocutor must trust Socrates. This trust is not necessarily granted from the outset; it is gradually established through attentive listening. Socrates follows his interlocutor's reasoning with care, even if it seems mistaken, in which case he challenges his partner with frankness and goodwill. Yet this trust is severely tested, for Socrates destabilizes certainties without offering any positive knowledge in return. The Platonic dialogues show diverse reactions: some interlocutors, like Meno, express frustration at a method that paralyzes rather than enlightens, while others, such as the young men who gather around Socrates, develop a lasting trust, despite, or even because of, this continual unsettling.

The relationship between Socrates and his interlocutors is often ambivalent and varies across the dialogues. One cannot claim in general that all of them

trusted him a priori. In many dialogues, the interlocutors begin with a respectful or admiring attitude, owing to his reputation for wisdom, his seniority, or simply his engaging style. Thus they see him as a man who asks good questions or who might teach them something. Sometimes they voluntarily seek him out and agree to converse with him, which presupposes at least a minimal methodological trust: the idea that an exchange is possible. But this trust is often naïve or superficial. It rests on a false image of Socrates, that of a master of knowledge, rather than on an understanding of the rigor and radicality of his method.

This trust weakens as soon as the dialogue becomes unsettling. Very quickly, as Socrates deconstructs their beliefs, many interlocutors grow defensive, evasive, or even hostile. Disappointed, they realize that Socrates does not confirm what they thought they knew, and that he questions their status, their identity, or their inner coherence. The initial trust therefore turns into rejection, or at best unease, for Socrates actually makes his interlocutor lose confidence in himself. Certain figures, such as Plato himself, Alcibiades, or Theaetetus, represent more receptive interlocutors, sometimes admiring, sometimes troubled, but who do not break the bond. In these young or “philosophical” souls, trust is not merely admiration: it gradually turns into recognition of the educational role of disturbance, into a taste for self-examination. These are the rare figures who follow Socrates through to the end of the dialectical process, even if it means acknowledging their ignorance.

It must be recalled that Socrates strategically relies on the apparent trust of his interlocutors in order to redirect it. He often begins with flattery, false modesty, or irony; he even gives the impression of wanting to learn from them: “I am ignorant, teach me what you know.” But this posture is meant solely to

bring out the incoherence in the other. Trust is therefore philosophically instrumentalized. Thus, if Socrates' interlocutors trust him at the start, this trust is fragile, rarely grounded in a genuine understanding of his method. It quickly turns into resistance or rejection, except among a few rare individuals driven by love of truth. Yet Socrates does not actually seek to inspire affective trust: he aims at inner reversal, even if this entails confusion, loss of bearings, or intellectual humiliation. True Socratic trust is not granted in advance; it must be earned through the trial of dialogue. Nevertheless, Socrates does provide a dialectical framework that is safe in its own way, for the conversation is structured by implicit rules of good faith, logical rigor, and philosophical rectitude. As long as he does not feel personally threatened, the interlocutor understands that it is only his argument being examined, even if this somewhat reflects back on him personally.

That said, some interlocutors distrust Socrates from the outset, and this mistrust is an essential element of the dramatic atmosphere of the Platonic dialogues. Such initial suspicion can be explained in several ways, depending on the context and the type of interlocutor. In *The Apology*, Socrates emphasizes that his reputation harms him and he quotes his detractors: "Socrates is guilty of corrupting the youth, of not believing in the gods recognised by the city, and of introducing new deities... Socrates is a criminal, a busybody, who investigates things underground and in the heavens, who makes the weakest arguments stronger and teaches others to do the same." He is often perceived as a cunning sophist, a subversive, even a social destabilizer. This creates spontaneous mistrust, especially among representatives of the established order, magistrates, politicians, rhetoricians, or those attached to their status and certainties. For instance, in the *Gorgias*, Callicles is already on his guard: he suspects Socrates of wanting to trap him dialectically. In the *Greater Hippias*,

Hippias mistrusts Socrates from the beginning, accusing him of endless quibbling.

More generally, even without knowing Socrates personally, the way he questions can arouse immediate suspicion, giving the impression of being manipulated or ensnared. He does not follow the usual rules of debate; he does not seek to win, but to make the other falter. Some therefore distrust him from the very start, like an animal sensing a trap. Furthermore, Socrates does not conceal that he seeks truth about the good, justice, and happiness, and that he intends to expose contradictions in discourse. This involves a displayed moral *height* that may be perceived as arrogance, an uncompromising stance that unsettles those accustomed to complacency or social rituals. In a sense, this mistrust is not unfounded, for Socrates wishes to shake, overturn, expose. He does not stroke egos. He attacks false knowledge, fixed identities, and convenient opinions. He embodies a danger to well-settled egos. The Socratic dialogue is an ordeal. It is therefore natural that an interlocutor, instinctively defensive or attached to prestige, would enter the discussion with suspicion.

Thus, it should come as a surprise that some interlocutors immediately mistrust Socrates, a mistrust justified by the corrosive effect of his method. He is seen as a troublemaker, a subverter of appearances, a disquieting midwife. But it is precisely this initial resistance that makes the dialogue interesting: it puts to the test the sincerity of the philosophical quest. Socrates, for his part, does not seek easy trust; he seeks truth, even against his interlocutor's will. Those who refuse the Socratic framework altogether do so because they perceive him as ironic, manipulative, or merely provocative, and therefore threatening. Thrasymachus, in *The Republic*, accuses Socrates of asking questions without ever answering himself, suspecting a kind of bad faith. He thus refuses the

dialectical cooperation necessary for dialogue. Callicles, in the *Gorgias*, ultimately breaks off the dialogue, exasperated by Socrates' methods, which he judges too far removed from political and human realities. Such figures do not trust Socrates, either because they do not believe in his sincerity, or because they reject the moral or rational presuppositions on which his approach rests. Their mistrust shows that the Socratic dialogue requires a certain moral and intellectual disposition; without it, the exchange degenerates into sterile conflict.

## TRUST IN REASON

This threefold dimension of trust, in oneself, in others, and in reason, produces several paradoxes. First, Socratic practice demands trust in a process that begins by destroying our certainties. Next, it requires trust in the other while systematically revealing mutual ignorance. Finally, it presupposes the reliability of reason while constantly demonstrating its current limits. These paradoxes are not flaws but rather the very essence of the Socratic approach: to create a space where trust and criticism can productively coexist, where epistemic humility becomes the foundation of a shared search for truth. Trust in Socratic practice is thus neither naïve nor absolute, but critical and evolving, a trust that is continually rebuilt through the ordeal of questioning.

Trust and benevolence are two closely related notions in human relationships. Benevolence nurtures trust; it creates a safe environment in which trust can take root. When someone feels treated with benevolence, they are more inclined to trust, since they perceive the other as reliable and non-threatening. When trust exists, acts of benevolence are better received, taken as sincere rather than self-serving. Without trust, benevolence may be suspected of

manipulation or hypocrisy. A lack of benevolence breeds mistrust, which in turn produces distance or conflict. Trust relies on the reliability and predictability of the other; it is an active intention of support. Benevolence is often the soil in which trust grows, and trust amplifies the effects of benevolence. Together, they form the foundation of healthy and lasting relationships. Thus, in Socratic practice, the relation between trust and benevolence is fundamental for creating an authentic and transformative space of reflection. For Socrates, philosophy is not a battle of egos but a common search for truth. Benevolence plays a key role. Socrates listens to his interlocutor with respect, even as he questions their ideas. This attitude encourages openness. He does not seek to humiliate but to “midwife” minds. His benevolence disarms defensiveness. Without a sense of benevolence, the Socratic questioning would be perceived as aggression, blocking reflection, since the Socratic dialogue relies on mutual trust. The interlocutor must believe that Socrates is not manipulating him but helping him clarify his thoughts. He must accept doubting his certainties, which requires a climate of psychological safety. Without trust in reason, Socratic doubt would be felt as a threat, not as a tool of liberation.

Trust is an essential element of the Socratic dialogue. Yet one may ask whether trust belongs to reason or rather to affect, since it involves an interaction between cognition and emotion. One might think that trust is fundamentally rooted in emotion, since we often judge on the basis of instinctive feelings, various perceptions of another’s appearance, or unconscious social cues, rather than through rational calculation. At the same time, we analyze based on evidence or prior knowledge, and we spontaneously devise relational strategies. But trust may also be conceived as a reasoned social agreement allowing mutual benefit, a necessary condition for any constructive relationship. Thus, trust is neither purely rational nor purely emotional; it

emerges from both “systems”. Generally, its initial impulse is affective, while its long-term maintenance may call upon reason.

Nevertheless, in the Socratic practice, trust is presupposed, since it is regarded as reasonable and necessary. It is not a mere passing emotional state; it plays a foundational role, for it rests on several logical grounds. Mutual respect in inquiry: each supposes in the other a willingness to seek truth or meaning rather than to defend a position at all costs. Openness to rational reconsideration rather than dogmatism and rigidity. Respect for the rules of debate: coherence, relevance, and honesty. This may be called “epistemic trust”: a trust in one’s own and the other’s capacity to think, to seek, and to understand, thus a trust grounded in reason. There is an implicit agreement on the rationality of dialogue. In this way fallacious arguments are avoided, coherence is sought over victory, and one accepts modifying one’s point of view in the face of better reasons. Such trust is thus conditioned by rationality: one trusts the other as a reasonable being.

But to say that trust is reasonable does not mean it is detached from all emotion. For example, in order to voice an idea, ask a question, or admit ignorance, one must dare to be vulnerable. This act involves as much personal courage as logic. There is also a felt dimension in the exchange, since one relies on tone of voice, on demeanor, on perceived sincerity. These are non-rational elements, yet essential to the establishment of trust.

In general, Socrates embodies a certain faith in the rational nature of human beings, since according to him no one does evil willingly, an assumption of reason as a “natural” moral guide. The principle “Know thyself, and thou shalt know the universe and the gods” implies confidence in human capacity to reflect on oneself and on the world. And without trust, the Socratic dialogue

becomes impossible: one fears attack rather than understanding, defends one's positions with pride, and ceases to seek together. Trust is thus both the condition and the fruit of dialogue: it enables exchange, and exchange strengthens it. Thus, Socratic trust embodies a subtle union between reason and feeling, a contextual articulation necessary for any genuine philosophical dialogue.

## SOLITUDE

The violence of Socrates, understood as symbolic or existential violence, also manifests itself in the way he confronts the person with their solitude. Through his questioning, he destroys certainties, familiar attachments, and shared illusions. He forces the individual to no longer hide behind the group, tradition, habits, or ready-made discourses. This isolates in a radical way and makes one aware of this isolation. Moreover, the Socratic questioning does not provide ready-made answers; it asks questions. By pushing his interlocutor to define his own ideas, to justify his beliefs, and to examine the foundations of his thinking, Socrates places the individual face to face with himself. It is an intellectual journey where one is both captain and passenger of the same vessel. This confrontation with one's own shortcomings, contradictions, or ignorance can generate a feeling of intellectual solitude. The interlocutor realizes that the opinions he thought solid may be fragile, and that he can rely only on his own reason to rebuild or refine them. There is no external authority to provide him with the truth; he must seek it within himself.

Furthermore, Socrates, by deepening the gap between what one believes oneself to be and what one really is, provokes a mise en abyme of the subject: each person finds themselves face to face with their own ignorance, with their

own responsibility, with the void of supposed knowledge, with the gaping hole of a threatened identity. This brutal confrontation with oneself can be experienced as a form of violence, for it destabilizes self-image, even narcissism, destroys the scaffolding of identity, and leaves the individual naked, without recourse. Socrates does not console, he does not protect. He opens a space of uncertainty which, though fruitful, is at first painful. His practice sheds light on a fundamental philosophical truth: to truly think is also to suffer at one's own expense, at least at the beginning. One can therefore say that Socrates exercises a form of ontological violence, not by attacking others, but by forcing them to become thinking subjects, that is, subjects alone before themselves, which can in fact be taken as aggression. Moreover, the mise en abyme of the subject before Socrates arises from the fact that he forces each one to watch himself think, to confront his own contradictions, the incoherence of his discourse, the illusion of his knowledge, the fragility of his position. The subject becomes a spectator of himself, discovering himself as fragmented, unstable, uncertain. This turning of the gaze back upon oneself is dizzying: it is no longer only a matter of speaking, of expressing oneself, for one observes what one says, and this cracks the evidence of identity. An experience that can prove painful, since this sudden and forced lucidity is not immediately liberating: it is at first uncomfortable, disarming. It removes reference points, it weakens identity. Human beings generally prefer a reassuring illusion to a destabilizing truth. Yet Socrates, through his method, deprives the other of this illusion. He does not humiliate, but he exposes. He does not condemn, but he lays bare. And that, for many, is a form of violence that is unbearable.

The term “mise en abyme” aptly describes the feeling of vertigo one can experience. By challenging notions once thought acquired, such as justice, courage, good, virtue, Socratic questioning touches on fundamental aspects of

our person and of our vision of the world. If what I thought to be true is not, then who am I? On what basis can I build myself? This forced introspection leads us to probe the depths of our own convictions, until we discover a void or an incoherence where we expected to find certainty and solidity. It is a plunge into the unknown of one's own mind, which can be both frightening and incredibly liberating. This is a violence of language, of reason, of truth, productive, certainly, but painful. This experience can be lived in a dramatic way, for it breaks the false image of self, the appearance, the intellectual security. But it can also be lived as joyful or liberating, insofar as such deconstruction opens up a new space, an inner availability. By breaking rigid certainties, it allows the subject to be reborn to himself, no longer content with borrowed ideals, but seeking a personal and living meaning. This vertigo then becomes a call to self-creation, a movement toward greater autonomy and authenticity. Where illusion falls away, a desire to learn, to understand, to transform oneself can arise. The Socratic violence, once accepted, is converted into a power of emancipation.

What enables a person to experience this as joyful or liberating is his inner disposition toward doubt and change. It presupposes a certain mental flexibility: the capacity to tolerate uncertainty, to endure the temporary loss of reference points, to avoid identifying completely with one's ideas. He who accepts not knowing everything, not controlling everything, can see in questioning an opening rather than a collapse. It is also a matter of existential maturity: if one values the search for truth more than intellectual comfort, if one desires to grow rather than to be reassured, then the Socratic upheaval becomes an opportunity. In short, only a subjectivity already somewhat decentered, curious about itself, capable of looking at itself without excessive defense, can transform the pain of exposure into a movement toward freedom.

It is important to emphasize that this solitude and this mise en abyme are not ends in themselves. They are stages, often uncomfortable, in a process of self-knowledge and intellectual growth. Socrates, through his maieutic, aimed to help individuals give birth to their own truths. The initial unease is often the price to pay to reach a more authentic and solid understanding, built upon personal reflection rather than received opinions. It is by accepting to face this solitude and this mise en abyme that one can hope, according to Socratic philosophy, to attain a form of wisdom. Socrates questions, destabilizes, and sends each back to himself. Yet this destabilization is in fact a necessary passage that conditions a real stability. A stability not found in tangible results and certainties, but in trust in a process, in trust in our own capacity for reason, in self-confidence.

Socrates constantly drives the individual into self-examination. He does not say: “Here is the truth.” Rather, he says: “You who claim to know, tell me what you mean by…” In doing so, he creates a mirror effect. Thus, the interlocutor finds himself facing his own contradictions, caught in a play of language that throws him into turmoil, entering into a mise en abyme of thinking, where each answer calls forth a new question. This is not only a dialectical method; it is an existential experience. This humiliation is not gratuitous; it is liberating for thinking, yet it remains wounding. Socrates does not give answers, which confronts one with the solitude of thinking. He questions us, but one cannot know what he wants, one cannot truly satisfy him, for he wants nothing but to make us think, to send us back to ourselves. He forces each one to think alone, to assume his own ideas, to abandon received discourses. It amounts to saying: “You must search for yourself. No one can do it in your place.” This demand for autonomy is demanding, supportive, but also solitary.

His questioning in fact drains words of their apparent certainty, of the trust we place in them, of the comfort they give us. He always seems to ask the same thing: “What do you mean by…?” Yet this simple question has the effect of emptying words of their obviousness, stripping concepts bare, revealing that no one really knows. This disturbance can be experienced as a symbolic aggression, a radical undermining of intellectual and social identity. This violence is unavoidable, according to Plato and Socrates himself, for truth necessarily passes through crisis. One cannot know or discover without accepting not to know. True thinking is born in inner work, rather solitary and painful. Socrates even compares his method in this respect to that of his mother, a midwife, for the process of biological birth is indeed solitary and painful.

One may therefore indeed affirm that Socrates sends each person back to a form of fundamental solitude: that of thinking for oneself, of facing the unknown, of relying only on one’s own lucidity. This solitude is not a punishment, but a condition of moral autonomy. In this sense, this mise en abyme is unavoidable if one wants to become oneself. This violence is necessary to leave illusion behind and access authentic thinking.

Paradoxically, the presence of Socrates is a cause of “exile” and “wandering”; it reveals, without saying so, the existential solitude of each person, it makes us feel with our very hands the nothingness that inhabits us. His presence is therefore frightening. At the same time, in the long run, he teaches his interlocutor to be responsible for himself, to be autonomous, in an authentic and radical way. Such an experience prepares us for the recurrent crises and dilemmas of life. This is the broader meaning of the famous saying: “To philosophize is to learn to die.”

# MALEVOLENCE

In Plato's dialogues, particularly in *The Apology of Socrates*, we discover a striking portrait of the suspicions and accusations directed against the philosopher. Plato reveals how his contemporaries attributed to Socrates intentions far darker than the mere pursuit of wisdom. The official accusations brought by Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon rest on two charges: "Socrates does wrong by corrupting the young and by not believing in the gods whom the city believes in, but in other new spiritual things." But beyond these formal grievances, Plato depicts accusers convinced that Socrates concealed truly subversive aims. The charge of corrupting the youth reveals a particularly serious suspicion: a deliberate intent to pervert young Athenians. His detractors saw him not as a benevolent teacher, but as a manipulator seeking to turn the younger generation away from traditional civic values.

In several dialogues, Plato also shows how certain interlocutors accuse Socrates of intellectual bad faith. For example, Thrasymachus abruptly interrupts the dialogue to hurl insults at Socrates. He considers that Socrates has given himself the easier role by being only the questioner and not the one answering, a position easier to hold. He explicitly accuses Socrates of intellectual deceit in refusing to expose himself to questioning, which is in fact untrue. His interrogative method is then perceived as a rhetorical trap rather than a sincere search for truth. Thrasymachus in *The Republic* or Polus in the *Gorgias* both express frustrations with the Socratic method. They see Socrates as someone who plays with words or uses dialectic to embarrass his interlocutors rather than enlighten them, evidence, in their eyes, of his malicious intentions. Indeed, some sophists or intellectuals of the time may have perceived in this

practice a desire to undermine their authority and destabilize their influence over youth and society, a troubling form of competition.

Socratic irony itself becomes suspect. His famous profession of ignorance is seen by some as a pretense, a strategy to better destabilize his interlocutors and ridicule them publicly. Moreover, a serious historical accusation concerns his ties with former disciples who, “because of him”, became enemies of democracy, such as Alcibiades and Critias, an issue that indeed damaged his reputation. Thus Plato reveals how Socrates, far from being perceived by all as a harmless sage, was suspected of being a dangerous subversive acting under the mask of philosophy. These accusations of malevolent intent run throughout the Platonic work, creating a complex portrait of a man whose very sincerity becomes a subject of controversy.

In the *Gorgias*, Callicles reproaches Socrates for being a impotent man, incapable of action, who seeks only to contradict others out of a spirit of contradiction. He accuses him of diverting young people from real life by pushing them to despise strength, glory, and pleasure. To him, Socrates is a hypocrite who uses dialectic to escape reality and impose the morality of the weak. He hurls at him: "Socrates, you seem as bold and loud in your speeches as any demagogue. You spend your time chatting and refuting everyone, but if you were really attacked or accused in court, you would be powerless... You would even let yourself be beaten without fighting back. You are incapable of defending yourself or your friends; you live in an imaginary world made up of words. " Thus Socrates would be a sophist in disguise, pretending to seek the truth while manipulating his interlocutors to ridicule them, all the while becoming powerless. His incessant questions would not be aimed at enlightening, but at destabilising and humiliating those he questions, in a

useless manner. And by questioning traditional values and social norms, Socrates would seek to undermine the established order and sow disorder, without offering anything constructive.

In the *Greater Hippias*, Hippias accuses Socrates of bad faith and of seeking victory rather than truth. He grows irritated with his incessant questions and detours, claiming that Socrates only wants to trap his interlocutors: “You are always making difficulties and twisting arguments, so that you are never satisfied with any answer.. You contradict everything I say, turning things upside down with your questions.” In *Sophist*, the Stranger from Elea distinguishes the true philosopher from the mere polemicist or eristic, and although Socrates is not explicitly targeted, the dialogue reflects discomfort with the excesses of the Socratic method, which sometimes seems to spin in circles. In the *Protagoras*, the titular sophist, after a long exchange, reproaches Socrates for driving him into artificial contradictions and prevent him from speaking: "Socrates, you keep changing the subject and your method! Let me speak now... You always want to conduct the conversation in your own way, and no one can follow you." Even in the *Phaedo*, his disciples, though filled with admiration, Cebes and Simmias, are disconcerted: they fear that his discourses may be nothing but fine constructions, consoling fictions rather than grounded truths. Finally, in *The Apology*, Socrates reports that the citizens of Athens accuse him of being a cunning sophist, corrupting the youth and mocking the gods. Even if he defends himself, these accusations reveal the ambiguity of his public figure: he is judged arrogant, subversive, dangerous.

Already in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, Socrates appears as a ridiculous sophist, enclosed in the clouds, detached from reality, teaching the young to make the unjust speech triumph. This popular caricature presents him not as a sage, but

as a corrupter of minds, ready to twist truth in order to gain prestige or dominate. In Plato's *Gorgias*, Callicles reproaches Socrates for being a discontented man, incapable of enjoying life, who masks his weakness behind lofty moralizing speeches. For him, Socrates subverts natural values, such as strength or success, in the name of an abstract justice that in fact serves only to conceal his impotence. Xenophon, though a defender of Socrates, sometimes depicts him as cunning or provocative, playing with his irony to embarrass his interlocutors. This reinforces the idea that he does not merely seek truth, but also enjoys destabilizing.

Modern philosophers, such as Nietzsche, have not spared Socrates. For him, Socrates is the symptom of a weakening of Greek civilization: he represents the revenge of the weak against the strong, a morbid rationalist who denies vital instincts in favor of a morality of decadence. His supposed quest for truth would be nothing but a mask to repress life. Even Kierkegaard, though admiring of Socrates, questioned his method: he saw in him a spiritual seducer, who pretends to know nothing, but subtly directs his interlocutor where he wants. Socratic irony, according to him, contains a form of manipulation. Some contemporary critics emphasize that Socrates was not neutral: his dialogues are often asymmetrical, he dominates the speech, and his refusal to articulate a clear doctrine can be seen as a way of escaping responsibility. Thus, from Antiquity to today, Socrates has been accused not only of being a provocateur or a sophist, but also of exerting a covert influence behind the apparent modesty of his ignorance. This reductive reading presents Socrates as a sophist who conceals his true intentions behind a façade of disinterested inquiry. For between awakening consciences and subtle control, his figure remains ambivalent, both inspiring and disturbing.

Nevertheless, if we reserve the term “violence” for actions directly coercive or intentionally harmful, we might also consider it improper to describe the Socratic method as violent, which remains in a sense benevolent. It is rather a matter of creative tension, intended to provoke an inner transformation in his interlocutors, rather than something that can be strictly categorized as violence. One could also propose the idea that this violence is indirect, unintended, consequential. It is mainly linked to the intensity of intellectual confrontation, depending on the individuals. That is to say, for example, if a person is arrogant, he may react emotionally to the Socratic questioning, and thus the questioner becomes guilty of violence simply because he provoked this reaction, whereas others may take it calmly or with interest, as we see in certain dialogues.

Indeed, the problem is raised by Alcibiades, a young man in love with Socrates, in *The Symposium*, who accuses Socrates of “cheating”, as he says he want to make people reason, but in reality, he plays with their emotions, as he disorients his interlocutors, humiliate them, and even wound them. “When I listen to him, my heart leaps more than that of any Corybant in a dance, his words make my tears flow; I see myself enslaved. He makes people think their lives are not worth living… He plays with us as if we were children. When he speaks, he bewilders us utterly, so that we are at a loss… I am bitten in the heart, stung by his words, and my soul is filled with shame.” We observe the mixture of admiration and resentment Alcibiades expresses for Socrates’ power over the emotions of others.

This passage reflects a tension often raised about the Socratic method: although Socrates claims to seek truth through reasoning, his methods elicit intense emotional reactions from his interlocutors. Alcibiades explains at length

the paradoxical character of Socrates, how he can be both captivating and disconcerting. Socrates claims to help his interlocutors reason clearly and discover truth by themselves, yet his insistence on pointing out their ignorance, contradictions, or weaknesses can provoke strong emotional reactions, such as frustration, anger, or even admiration. This tension between reasoning and emotion lies at the very heart of Socratic practice. For the Socratic method rests on incisive questions that force interlocutors to question their certainties, a process that may seem rational but also touches on deep aspects of identity and ego, inevitably generating emotional responses.

Alcibiades' accusation goes even further: "His words bite and sting; they wound my soul… No one moves me as this man does. When I hear him, I am possessed." These remarks show precisely the paradox of Socrates, the tension and interlacing between emotions and reason, when Alcibiades accuses Socrates of knowing exactly how to stir emotions, while pretending to be concerned only with reason. This brilliantly captures the duality of Socrates: a philosopher who claims to guide toward truth through reason, but who, through provocative methods, also touches emotions powerfully. This remark highlights the human and disturbing aspect of Socratic philosophy, which far exceeds the strict framework of logical reasoning.

But if we affirm that this violence that provokes emotions is indirect, unintended, consequential, it is because it is in fact not desired by Socrates. The aim of his inquiry in dialogue is to invite the individual to reason, to set himself in search of truth, and to know himself. Everything is done for this purpose, but of course the "human" in us resists the "divine", the earthly resists the celestial. According to Plato, resistance to reasoned dialogue is not rational, but essentially psychological and existential: it reveals the fragility of

the human being, who fears the loss of security, recognition, or control. Indeed, individuals are attached to their beliefs, opinions, or prejudices, which they consider as integral parts of their personal identity. In the dialogues, one sees that resistance to reasoning often arises from pride or fear. Pride, because admitting ignorance or error is humiliating. Fear, because questioning deeply rooted convictions produces existential insecurity. Individuals often prefer the comfort of a false certainty to the uncomfortable effort of sincere critical reflection. They fear the inner turmoil, both mental and emotional, that accompanies self-awareness and self-examination.

Socrates often provokes negative emotions in his interlocutors, and one could accuse him of lacking empathy, even of being cruel or sadistic. His approach may seem destabilizing or even humiliating for those who consider themselves experts, like the sophists. However, this provocation is not gratuitous. It aims at a pedagogical objective: to lead the other to recognize his own intellectual limits, and then to seek a deeper truth. It fits rather within a philosophical endeavor aimed at awakening interlocutors to their own ignorance, an indispensable stage, according to him, for attaining knowledge. In this framework, Socrates is not indifferent to the emotions of his interlocutors, but he subordinates them to a higher objective: the search for truth. This choice may be misunderstood as a lack of empathy, but it rather reflects a priority given to the intellectual and moral transformation of the individual. Socrates considers that making someone feel a certain unease or confusion is sometimes necessary to initiate genuine philosophical progress.

The accusation of “cruelty” or “sadism” rests on the idea that Socrates takes pleasure in humiliating or hurting his interlocutors. Yet nothing in the texts suggests that Socrates derives personal satisfaction from the suffering of

others. On the contrary, he often seems to adopt a humble posture, presenting himself as ignorant and seeking to learn from others, and he is generally patient. His irony, though it may appear mocking, is above all a rhetorical tool intended to disarm prejudices, passions, and rigidities, and to create a space for constructive dialogue, or even to lighten the discussion, to de-dramatize it, so as to think more freely. His primary objective is to help his interlocutors progress, even if the method may be uncomfortable. He affirms in *The Apology* that he acts out of “divine devotion”, like a “gadfly” sent to awaken the Athenians from their intellectual torpor. This sacred mission implies shaking the certainties of individuals, including those of sophists, but it does not mean that he seeks to wound them intentionally.

Although Socrates may seem insensitive to the immediate emotions of his interlocutors, his attitude can also be understood as a form of deep empathy. By confronting his interlocutors with their contradictions, he treats them as beings capable of reflection and intellectual progress. He thus grants them a form of implicit respect, considering them worthy of rigorous intellectual effort, a paradoxical form of respect. One could propose that he does not respect the “person”, but respects the reason within him, what he calls the divine spark in each of us. By confronting his interlocutors with their contradictions, he treats them as beings capable of reflection and intellectual progress. He thus grants them a form of implicit respect, considering them worthy of rigorous intellectual effort.

However, one can still reproach Socrates with a certain rigidity in his method. By insisting on logical confrontation and the exposure of errors, he can sometimes neglect the psychological and emotional dimensions of his interlocutors. For example, some sophists or Athenian citizens might have

preferred a gentler accompaniment or recognition of their skills before being publicly contradicted. This reproach may highlight a potential limit of the Socratic approach: in privileging truth and reason, it risks overlooking the emotional and relational nuances that shape human interactions. Nonetheless, this is not sufficient to label Socrates as cruel, sadistic, or entirely devoid of empathy. Certainly, he maintains a certain emotional distance in his exchanges, but this distance is not necessarily a sign of coldness or lack of empathy; rather, it is a necessary condition to conduct an impartial and rigorous philosophical dialogue. By detaching himself from immediate emotions, Socrates creates a space where critical thinking can emerge freely.

In the end, it is probably unfair to accuse Socrates of cruelty or of a total insensitivity. His method, though provocative, is not intended to wound or humiliate, but to stimulate constructive questioning. If Socrates may seem distant or severe, it is because he places the search for truth above social conventions or individual sensitivities. This posture is not beyond criticism, but it does not amount to cruelty. On the contrary, it testifies to a confidence in his interlocutors' capacity to transcend their errors and rise toward a clearer understanding of the world and toward peace of mind.

## CLOSED QUESTIONS

Closed questions were a very important tool in the Socratic questioning, because they allowed no way out. For example: "Is it not true that…?" They play a specific role within the framework of a dialogue, a discussion, or a philosophical questioning. Their main function is to channel thinking, to frame

the possible answers, to allow for a quick clarification of ideas, and to ensure a common progression. Closed questions aim to obtain clear and direct answers, often by “yes” or “no”, or by choosing one term of an alternative, which is called “diairesis”.

Yet closed questions can seem violent in certain contexts, not because they are intrinsically aggressive, but because of the way they influence the dynamic of a discussion or dialogue, which may at times be interpreted very negatively, for various reasons. In fact, many contemporary dialogical practices categorically forbid them.

A closed question limits the possible answers to a narrow choice. This can give the impression of “reducing the freedom of thinking” of the interlocutor. They may thus be perceived as an intrusion into the individual’s mental space, an attempt to force a clear answer where there is confusion or uncertainty. When a closed question is asked abruptly or in a tense context, it can resemble an implicit accusation, especially when it contains an implicit criticism. For example: “Do you agree that your position is contradictory?” Such a formulation can seem to accuse the interlocutor of lacking coherence, even if that is not the primary intention, since they may still respond that it is not the case. A closed question can create an impression of judgment or rejection, which in itself should not be disqualifying. For closed questions mainly serve to oblige a person to take a clear stance, to become aware of the content of their words, or even to realize their opposition toward an interlocutor, which in itself should not pose a problem.

A closed question can sometimes be used to identify or provoke disagreement. For example: “Do you really think that common sense is enough to solve this problem?” It heightens the tension of the debate by forcing the interlocutor to

take a side, which for some people is too hard to handle psychologically. Moreover, they risk minimizing the richness of thinking. By forcing a clear answer, a closed question may seem to deny complexity, and thus appear brutal or reductive. In this sense, it can represent a form of symbolic violence, especially if it is covertly used to impose a truth or a norm. For instance: “Do you realize that your reasoning is flawed?” Such a question can seem to exclude any possibility of dialogue or mutual reconsideration, which contradicts the ideal of philosophy as a confrontation of perspectives, whether collectively or within oneself. Closed questions tend to oversimplify complex problems by reducing them into binary choices. By imposing a limited answer, a closed question may seem to ignore the nuances needed to address philosophical or existential questions.

Nevertheless, in some cases it can be entirely justified, when a statement is absurd or made in bad faith. Their violence is therefore not inherent: it depends on the context, on the intention of the one who asks, and above all on how the interlocutor receives it. To avoid this impression of violence, it is essential to use closed questions with discernment and to complement them with open questions that allow for a deeper exploration of ideas, precisely what Socrates did.

Diairesis in Socrates is a dialectical method or technique that consists in dividing a concept or idea into its constituent, more specific elements, in order to better understand its nature and clarify its meaning. It serves both for maieutics and for refutation. For example, if one is discussing the notion of “virtue”, one might ask: “What are the different forms of virtue?” This progressive division allows one to explore the particular aspects of a general concept. The goal is to clarify and define the terms used in a discussion, so as to

avoid misunderstandings and contradictions. It is also the moment of problematization, when one must think through negation, think through the opposite, with the conceptual tension that this binarity creates. By forcing the interlocutor to choose between two opposing positions, closed questions can provoke an awareness of their own beliefs or contradictions. By exploring these distinctions, Socrates leads his interlocutor to specify his thought and to recognize ambiguities or contradictions in his statements. In *Sophist*, Socrates uses this division systematically to identify the nature of the sophist. By dividing a concept into its elements, he guides his interlocutor toward a clearer and more nuanced understanding, structuring reasoning in a clear and simple manner. Nevertheless, after having explored the different forms of a concept through diairesis, Socrates could then attempt to synthesize these observations to propose a general definition of the concept under study.

In general, for there to be a real discussion, there must be a minimal agreement of meaning. A closed question can serve to verify whether this minimal agreement already exists or not. Such questions force the interlocutor to take a stance immediately, which clarifies their point of view. Closed questions help structure a discussion by limiting the options for response. This avoids digressions and keeps the dialogue focused on a specific subject. Closed questions can therefore help quickly identify divergences or convergences between interlocutors. They are a powerful tool for highlighting contradictions in an interlocutor's reasoning. By forcing a clear answer, they oblige the individual to take a coherent stance. Closed questions also allow one to validate or invalidate shared or implicit presuppositions in a discussion. They help verify whether an idea is accepted as evident, or whether it requires further justification. Closed questions can thus test whether an opinion is widely shared, or whether it belongs to rhetorical manipulation.

Closed questions simplify choices by reducing the possible answers. This can be useful in situations where a decision must be taken quickly, or where a discussion risks becoming confusing. Closed questions can also reveal whether a suspicion is justified or not. Certainly, they must be used with caution, for they risk limiting the exploration of nuances and complexities of thinking. Thus, closed questions must be complemented by open questions to foster deeper reflection. Socrates therefore alternated between open and closed questions. Yet while his systematic questioning is often seen as aggressive, closed questions are considered particularly violent, especially in our time, when our contemporaries suffer from an exacerbated sensitivity, socially justified, since they are merciless toward the absence of rationality.

## REFUTATION

Socratic questioning has two facets: on the one hand, *maieutics*, the "midwifery of the mind"; on the other, *refutation* (*elenchos*), a dialectical method used to examine and challenge the beliefs, opinions, or assertions of an interlocutor, along with their reasoning errors, in order to reach a better understanding of the truth. This process rests on systematic questioning, where Socrates leads his interlocutor to formulate definitions or arguments, then exposes their contradictions or inadequacies through counter-examples or precise questions. The aim is not simply to discredit the interlocutor but to provoke a questioning of received ideas, leading to conceptual clarification or the awareness of ignorance. Refutation thus serves as a lever for accessing more rigorous thinking and sustaining the activity of reflection.

In a group setting, this often results in public humiliation, since the interlocutor usually does not fully realize what is happening: he suddenly perceives that he does not really understand what he is claiming. For example, in the *Gorgias*, Socrates dismantles Callicles' rhetoric by exposing its contradictions. One could thus claim that he pretends to help the other "give birth" to their ideas, while in fact revealing their absurdity. The interlocutor believes he possesses or is discovering the truth, but then realizes it escapes him. This often involves *reductio ad absurdum*, when Socrates pushes the adversary's premises to a grotesque conclusion. At that point, the interlocutor must either abandon his thesis or accept an absurdity. In *The Republic*, for instance, he shows that Thrasymachus' definition of justice as "the interest of the stronger" would mean that the strong could mistakenly act against their own interests. Another strategy is pressing language: taking a common term such as justice, courage, or love, and demanding a precise definition, one that cannot be found, and perhaps does not exist. Thus the interlocutors realize they are using words devoid of real meaning. In the *Laches*, for example, no one manages to define courage without contradicting themselves.

Let us now take a passage from the *Gorgias* where Socrates explains his approach to refutation, as opposed to the "debate" of ideas. Socrates: *"I imagine, Gorgias, that you, like me, have had experience of a great many discussions. And in these discussions you must have observed one fact: people have difficulty defining the subjects they start to discuss, and difficulty bringing their conversation to a conclusion after having mutually instructed one another. Instead, if they disagree on something, if one says the other is mistaken or confused, they grow irritated with one another, and each thinks the other speaks in bad faith, merely seeking the last word, rather than trying to discover the truth of the matter. Sometimes it even ends badly: they insult each*

*other, hurl back the same abuse, until the listeners regret having come to hear such people. Do you wonder why I mention this? Because I think what you just said is not entirely consistent, nor fully in harmony with what you first said about rhetoric. And I am afraid to refute you, I fear you will think that my eagerness aims, not at clarifying our subject, but at criticizing you. So listen: if you are like me, I would gladly question you; if not, I will give it up. Do you want to know what kind of man I am? I am someone who is happy to be refuted when I am wrong, and who also takes pleasure in refuting when what is said is false; but to me, being refuted is no less agreeable than refuting. In fact, I think it is a greater benefit to be refuted, since being rid of the worst of evils does more good than ridding someone else of it. For I consider no evil greater for a man than to hold false opinions about the matters we are now discussing. So if you assure me that you are like me, let us talk together; otherwise, let us end the discussion right here."*

In this text, Socrates specifies the conditions and rules of philosophical dialogue, a structured exchange in "questions and answers" that contrasts with a ruleless, more spontaneous conversation where each speaks as he pleases, usually at length. Such "free debate" tends toward confusion, leads nowhere, and quickly becomes highly emotional when speakers confront one another, for each seeks to prove himself before the others. Mutual denunciations fly about without deepening anything, and the discussion often ends badly, enriching neither the participants nor the audience. Yet people accustomed to such exchanges fail to grasp the principle of mutual questioning: they feel threatened and refuse it, because they mistrust the intentions of their interlocutor. Socrates therefore tries to clarify his stance and his attitude in practicing refutation, which stands entirely opposed to the usual "debate".

The main reason is that the goal is not so much to learn as to *unlearn*, that is, to deconstruct the false ideas cluttering the mind. It is a posture of humility, where the interlocutor allows us access to truth, rather than an opportunity to "defeat" him and prove ourselves right. This is the principle of rational refutation, which requires short, precise questions and answers, under the condition of mutual trust and openness. A frustrating kind of discipline that Socrates imposes, to which interlocutors often rebel, deliberately or not, for cognitive or emotional reasons.

Despite his rhetorical precautions, Socrates rightly doubts that Gorgias is capable of such an exercise. This incident, moreover, responds to those who think resistance to Socrates comes from his failure to explain what he does, or from his not warning his interlocutors when he questions them, or not obtaining their informed consent. Yet explanation seems futile, since everything depends on the interlocutor's receptivity, his capacity and willingness to face himself without fear or indignation at the "treatment" he undergoes.

From this perspective, the Socratic regulation does violence to "free debate". But one could equally affirm that "free debate", despite appearances, is in fact violent, since it is inherently competitive rather than collaborative, contrary to Socrates' approach. Thus, paradoxically, Socrates seeks to counter violence with violence, though this requires a change of relational and discursive paradigm that is far from easy, given human chronic narcissism.

The main enemy of Socrates in his dialogues, the very target of refutation, is *bad faith*. Generally speaking, bad faith designates an attitude in which a person lies to themselves or to others, consciously or even unconsciously refusing to acknowledge a disturbing truth. It consists in evading responsibility

for one's words, choices, or contradictions, often by means of excuses, logical evasions, misleading justifications, or various avoidance strategies. Bad faith manifests in the refusal of coherence and in a form of inner duplicity: feigning sincerity while protecting one's interests or illusions. It is often linked to fear of losing face, control, or self-image, out of a desire always to be right.

Jean-Paul Sartre gave the concept a more technical and radical meaning than the everyday sense. For him, bad faith consists in fleeing the freedom and responsibility inherent in our condition as conscious beings, by lying to ourselves. This peculiar lie is possible because consciousness is divided: it can be both the liar and the deceived. Bad faith, in Sartre's view, rests on an ontological tension: the human being is both an empirical entity, a given like any object, and a free consciousness. Yet we often refuse this duality and try to freeze ourselves into a fixed identity, in order to escape the anguish of freedom. Thus, bad faith is not merely hypocrisy or social duplicity, but an existential strategy to evade the anxiety of having to choose and define oneself at every instant. It is an active denial of our fundamental freedom.

Certainly, Plato does not conceptualize bad faith as such, but he stages forms of self-dissimulation, refusal of inner truth, and withdrawal before the demand of thinking, which strongly resemble what Sartre would later theorize under that name. Socrates, in this sense, is a forerunner in unmasking bad faith, through his insistence on inner coherence, lucidity, and the exposure of the self. Implicit illustrations of the concept appear repeatedly in Socratic dialogues, above all in the form of self-deception motivated by the refusal to assume one's freedom and existential responsibility. For instance, interlocutors who claim to know what they do not know, like Euthyphro, Meno, or Callicles. Such pretension is a form of denial, since the individual takes refuge in ready-

made beliefs, dogmas, or appearances of knowledge rather than admitting ignorance. The refusal to examine one's own existence, to face oneself, one's truth, and one's contradictions, is a kind of ontological cowardice, very close to Sartre's description of flight from the anguish of free existence. Rhetorical manipulation, so often practiced by the sophists whom Socrates opposes, is another example. It is the art of argumentation in service of persuasion rather than truth. This strategy of hiding behind language to avoid facing truth or responsibility can also be read as a form of bad faith. Thus, when Socrates pursues his interlocutor through dialogue and the process of refutation, it is not merely a formal intellectual exercise meant to "corner" or humiliate, as is too often thought, but a testing of existence itself. The aim is to confront the individual with his contradictions, his unexamined beliefs, his illusions about himself or the world. In this way, Socratic questioning seeks a form of self-revelation, where the human being is invited to recognize that he does not know, to abandon his identity-masks, and to accept uncertainty as the condition of authentic inquiry.

It is an exercise in freedom, but also in responsibility, since it compels the individual to situate himself, to choose, to build himself through thinking. As with Sartre, the refusal of this process is often linked to bad faith: many prefer to flee into comforting certainties or fixed roles rather than confront the anguish of a truth always in becoming. In this sense, Socrates does not seek to "convince" but to awaken his interlocutor's consciousness, to push him to become a subject in the fullest and most demanding sense. Socrates' main strategy for unmasking or confronting bad faith is the use of irony and dialectical questioning. He often begins by feigning ignorance, thereby putting the interlocutor at ease. Believing himself in a position of superiority, the latter then presents his view. This feigned ignorance aims to

reveal the contradictions in the discourse without shocking the other from the outset. Then Socrates poses a series of precise, seemingly innocent questions that lead the interlocutor to make explicit his presuppositions. Gradually, contradictions appear. When the interlocutor denies or contradicts his own words, bad faith becomes apparent. By logic, Socrates brings him to absurd conclusions drawn from his own affirmations. He does not say “you are wrong”, but leads the other to realize for himself that his position cannot hold. Thus each person is forced to account for his words rigorously, without hiding behind rhetoric or authority.

He does not respond to aggression or flattery, but remains focused on the logic of the discourse, which destabilizes those who attempt to escape truth through emotion or intimidation. In this way, Socrates unmasks bad faith not by frontal accusation but by leading the interlocutor to self-contradiction, through dialogue, logical rigor, and attentive listening. This strategy aims to strip away masks, to reveal truth through inner awareness rather than external imposition. In this perspective, Socrates is indeed a relentless exposer of bad faith ahead of his time, through his insistence on inner coherence, lucidity, and the exposure of the self.

## COMMON SENSE

“Common sense” plays an important role in the Socratic practice, both as a methodological tool and in a critical and strategic way. This rests partly on the multiple and shifting meanings of the concept.

Socrates generally begins his dialogues by questioning received ideas, popular beliefs, or “obvious” definitions, such as those concerning piety, justice,

courage, friendship, and so on. These ideas belong to “common sense”, meaning what “everybody thinks” or believes they know. He takes them as a starting point not because he accepts them, but because they are relatively shared and understandable to all. He uses these clichés or conventional ideas to involve his interlocutor: he pushes him to give a simple, intuitive definition of certain terms, then confronts him with contradictions through equally accessible examples. He relies on concrete cases drawn from ordinary experience, military, parental, political examples, etc., which also stem from common sense. This “common sense” is used as a dialectical lever, to provoke the realization of ignorance and initiate reflection. The aim is to move from the mere expression of opinions, hearsay repeated without any critical examination, unreflective beliefs, to the development of analyzed, clarified, and argued ideas. An intellectual demand that already poses a common difficulty.

Socrates begins with “common sense” but does not stop there: he uses it only to transcend it. His method consists in showing its limits and inconsistencies, and in forcing the interlocutor to go beyond superficial opinions. Yet in order to carry out this work within dialogue, he also relies on “common sense” in another sense: as the shared capacity to reason, intuitive and natural, which allows speech to make sense for everyone. This is despite differences in perspective and disagreements, indeed, disagreement itself is made possible by this mutual understanding. In other words, “common sense” is for him a heuristic tool, not a truth, even if it is accepted by all. It serves to make the mind “give birth” to something deeper. At the same time, by using common sense as a base, Socrates avoids jargon, erudition, or intellectual pretension. He addresses everyone, in a spirit of humility and universality, since the point is above all to be understood. It is also a way of showing that philosophy is

possible for anyone, provided one engages in it sincerely. Thus, he uses common sense as a starting point, as a mirror, and as a lever in his practice of dialogue. He mobilizes it to make others think, not to validate it as it is. His strength lies in his ability to start from the familiar in order to destabilize and elevate thinking toward the universal.

“Common sense” may therefore designate two distinct things, and Socrates deliberately plays on this ambiguity. On the one hand, “common sense” as widespread opinion (doxa), which is the most common and often pejorative meaning, particularly in a philosophical context. These are beliefs shared by the majority, often superficial or unexamined. They are “ready-made” ideas, seemingly obvious but fragile once interrogated. In this sense, Socrates challenges common sense: he takes it as material to be questioned, to expose its contradictions and awaken doubt.

This “common sense” can nonetheless serve as a starting point for philosophical reasoning. Because it rests on shared intuitions and everyday experiences, it can provide a base for inquiry. The philosopher, like Socrates, interrogates it, clarifies it, tests its coherence. He does not reject it outright but seeks to extract what in it may be valid or universal. Yet when it presents itself as already-existing knowledge, obvious and indisputable, it can block questioning and critical examination. It traps one in the repetition of received opinions, in what Plato calls doxa. Philosophical work thus consists in breaking with this apparent consensus. Nevertheless, it contains both prejudices and valid intuitions. The challenge is to distinguish between them, something Socrates does by pushing his interlocutors to explicate what they thought they knew, and to discover what they knew without really knowing it, a latent knowledge contained in ordinary language and lived experience.

On the other hand, “common sense” as the shared capacity to reason (koinos logos). This is a more noble and philosophical sense, which we might call universal good sense. It is a rational faculty shared by all humans, enabling them to discuss, compare, and draw just conclusions. It is what allows each person, through reason, to access a form of shared truth. It presupposes confidence in the capacity of the ordinary person to think rigorously, provided he is properly invited to do so. In this sense, Socrates relies on common sense: he trusts in shared reason and seeks to bring it forth through dialogue. Thus, Socrates combats the first sense of “common sense”, but mobilizes and values the second. He destroys opinion but to reveal reason. He denounces conformity but in order to let universality emerge. For Kant, this “common sense” is the natural foundation of logic.

Socrates does not explicitly employ a single technical term to designate what we would today call “common sense” as the natural reasoning capacity shared by all. Yet he presupposes its existence throughout his method and relies on it when he engages in dialogue. The closest term he often uses is logos, which in Greek means both “speech”, “discourse” and “reason”. It is therefore a discursive faculty, enabling human beings to dialogue rationally and examine things for themselves. When Socrates engages an interlocutor in reasoning by way of questions, he assumes that the other can access truth by drawing on the logos inherent in his humanity. He does not name it technically, but presupposes and activates it in dialogue, relying on each person’s ability to examine their own opinions and on the idea that each carries within themselves a portion of truth waiting to emerge. This implies trust in shared reason, even if not formalized as a concept in his discourse. Thus, “common sense”, in the second sense, that is, when used as an implicit norm, a dominant frame of thinking, or a form of collective conformism, may

indeed be perceived as aggression, especially by those who feel excluded, deprived of subjectivity, excessively questioned, marginalized, or silenced. Because it imposes a form of supposed shared normality or rationality, it places implicit pressure on the interlocutor. The one who thinks “differently” may be perceived as irrational, strange, or subversive. It tends to flatten differences, to render dissenting voices suspect through an effect of uniformization. Those who refuse to conform may be stigmatized, mocked, or excluded from debate. Common sense, erected as a form of symbolic power, can be mobilized to delegitimize certain experiences or ideas, since “It is obvious that…” is a habitual recourse in the Socratic dialogue. This attitude forbids questioning or critical exploration of the “common”. When common sense is elevated into indisputable truth, it may become an obstacle to intellectual emancipation and a subtle form of coercion, a barrier to critical thinking. Even when it presents itself as neutral or reasonable, common sense can, in certain contexts, become a form of symbolic violence. It acts as an invisible barrier that prevents thinking from venturing beyond well-trodden paths.

One might say that common sense, in the second sense, that is, as what is widely shared, considered obvious, or conventional, maintains an ambiguous relationship with rationality. It is both its practical foundation and its critical limit. It is the crucible of practical rationality, since it provides a base of shared representations, implicit values, and spontaneous categories that make communication and collective action possible. It allows reasoning within a framework comprehensible to all, without the need to justify everything from first principles each time. In this sense, it is a pragmatic base of reflection, a condition for everyday reasoning. Thus, we do not need to prove that “tomorrow will come” to organize our actions; this belongs to common sense. But common sense can also hinder critical rationality. Precisely because it is

“obvious”, it may escape examination. It may perpetuate prejudices, social dogmas, or false certainties that resist rational scrutiny. When it becomes an indisputable norm, it can stifle philosophical questioning and obstruct intellectual emancipation. For instance, asserting that “everyone must stay in their place” may seem reasonable in some cultures but can serve to justify social injustice.

Of course, certain human experiences, such as passion, creativity, or spiritual conversion, may transcend the rules of logic and common sense. These moments of rupture with common sense may explain rejection of the Socratic method. For example, an individual driven by turbulent passion or unrestrained desire may find the method too “cold” or analytical to account for their subjective experience. Similarly, someone transformed by a life-altering “conversion” may reject the rational framework of dialogue, adhering instead to a new existential perspective without seeking logical justification. In such cases, withdrawal from dialogue is not necessarily anger but rather an implicit recognition that the Socratic method has reached its limits in the face of deeper, more mysterious, or more intense human realities. Indeed, some explicitly reject the practice for such reasons, judging this slow, meticulous process to be technical, superficial, or reductive, or too “laborious”, as Nietzsche said, preferring the vigor of bold affirmation or the force of the tragic. Others consider the exercise simply too demanding, whether intellectually or emotionally, and recoil before the effort required to engage in philosophical dialogue. Between confronting one’s contradictions, questioning one’s certainties, and actively participating in the search for truth, it is understandable that some prefer to withdraw, openly or silently. There exists a fertile tension between “common sense” and rationality. Critical reason, as in Socrates or Descartes, begins precisely by interrogating common

sense in its banal sense. Yet reason cannot entirely detach from it: it needs a shared language, a common world in which to unfold. Rationality does not therefore deny common sense but seeks to clarify, re-examine, or surpass it. True rationality, an “open” rationality, requires leaning on common sense, being able to access it, without being trapped within it, testing it without scorning it. Socrates maintains both an open and critical view of “common sense”. Open, because he always begins with what his interlocutor thinks he knows; critical, because he seeks precisely to uncover its limits and contradictions. In other words, he uses common sense as an entry point, but never as the ultimate truth. In this way, he attributes to it a heuristic value: it serves as raw material for the search for truth. Very quickly, Socrates shows that what is taken as obvious does not withstand analysis: common sense is often contradictory, imprecise, or circular. He destabilizes received beliefs, not out of provocation, but because he seeks conceptual clarity and logical coherence. He treats common sense as a prejudice disguised as obviousness, and seeks to make its ignorance emerge. Thus, Socrates affirms that his wisdom lies in knowing that he does not know, unlike those who think they know, it is a pedagogy of transcendence.

Today, however, when someone is invited to reason by appealing to common sense, as Socrates does, some find the process artificial for several reasons. First, this kind of questioning destabilizes: it forces one out of ready-made answers and exposes incoherencies often preferred ignored. This unveiling may appear as a staged maneuver, since it forces reflection where one believed to have a clear opinion. What is perceived as “artificial” is therefore less the method itself than the discomfort it provokes. Second, the Socratic reasoning rests on a formal, structured logic that contrasts with the spontaneity of emotions, habits, or personal intuitions. To some, this gives the impression of

playing with words or seeking to trap rather than to understand. Rational discourse then seems cold, detached, at odds with lived reality. Finally, in an era where personal opinions are often valued as authenticity, questioning them is seen as intrusion or negation of self. Thus, what Socrates proposes as a path to truth is sometimes experienced as aggression or an “unnatural” mechanism. In other words: what is labeled artificial often reveals a deeper illusion that one does not wish to confront.

## THE MADNESS-WISDOM

Socrates does not trap his interlocutors into blindly obeying or rejecting common sense, but pushes them to transcend it through rational examination. He opens a breach: where opinion ends, philosophical work begins. This is therefore a dynamic vision: common sense must be set in motion, interrogated, not rejected or sacralized. For Socrates, common sense is never an end, but an invitation to think. There are moreover several moments in the Platonic dialogues where Socrates goes beyond discursive rationality, in the logical and argumentative sense, to appeal to other dimensions of human experience: intuition, divine inspiration, love, or even a kind of intellectual mysticism.

Socrates is often perceived as a rational philosopher, guided by logic and self-control. Yet several elements of his life and thinking suggest an irrational dimension, marked by dreams, divine signs, and mysterious experiences. He affirms in several dialogues that he is guided by an inner voice, his daimonion, an inner divine sign that warns or prevents him from acting in certain situations, when he was about to make a mistake. This phenomenon is not

rational in the strict sense, but he entirely trusted it; it belongs to personal inspiration, a kind of intuitive or spiritual wisdom, a divine inspiration. This suggests that he recognized limits to human reason and admitted that non-rational guidance could play a role in the search for the good. Socrates had prophetic dreams: for example, in the *Phaedo*, Socrates recounts a recurring dream urging him to practice music. He interpreted it as a call to philosophy, but just before his death he composed a hymn to Apollo, as if to obey that dream-message. According to the Apology, Socrates was deeply marked by the oracle that declared him the wisest man. This revelation, which he initially found absurd, pushed him to question the Athenians in order to understand it, a quest that seemed almost mystical. In *The Symposium*, Alcibiades reports that Socrates could stand still for hours in deep contemplation, as if in trance. Once, during the military campaign at Potidaea, he stood immobile through an entire cold night without rational explanation. In the *Crito*, as he drinks the hemlock, Socrates speaks calmly of the soul's immortality as if he had an irrational, almost religious certainty. His last words, "Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius", remain enigmatic: some interpret them as thanks to the god of healing for the "cure" that death represents, a mysterious and serene end. In the *Crito*, after his conviction, friends urge Socrates to escape prison. He refuses, invoking obedience to "divine laws" higher than human ones. His choice rests on a quasi-mystical conviction: he prefers death to betraying a transcendent form of justice.

In Phaedrus, Socrates even celebrates certain forms of "madness" as superior to ordinary reason, which are not ordinary irrationality but divine gifts that bring great blessings. He distinguishes four types of divine madness: prophetic madness from Apollo, ritual or initiatory madness from Dionysus, poetic madness from the Muses, erotic madness from Aphrodite. He presents them as

states of soul's elevation, where man touches the divine and accesses a higher truth than discursive rationality can reach, a deeper form of knowledge. He does not reject reason, but he admits it is not sufficient on its own to grasp ultimate realities such as beauty, justice, or the soul.
In *The Symposium*, Socrates, through Diotima's discourse, sets forth an ascending vision of love that leads from physical desire to contemplation of Beauty itself. This process, though structured, is more existential, aesthetic, and spiritual than purely logical. Eros, passion, becomes the engine of knowledge, but a contemplative knowledge that transcends dialectical analysis to reach a kind of intellectual ecstasy.

In Aristophanes' Clouds, a comedy caricaturing Socrates, he swears not by the traditional Greek gods but by abstract entities such as Air or Void. Though satirical, this scene suggests he was perceived as linked to obscure or unconventional forces. Socrates was apparently initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries, secret rites of death and rebirth, for some passages of the *Phaedo* on the soul's immortality resemble esoteric teachings of those cults. His serenity in facing death may stem from this initiation, never rationally explained. His view of death as deliverance is more mystical intuition than reasoned argument.

In the *Phaedo* and the *Meno* he defends the thesis that knowledge is a recollection (anamnesis) of truths the soul saw before birth, an ontology of the soul and an epistemology grounded in memory of the intelligible, not observation or argument alone. This implies that truth lies beyond sensory experience and discursive reasoning, in a metaphysical dimension accessible to the soul.

Thus, Socrates is a rationalist, but not a reductive one. He deeply values rational examination, conceptual clarity, and logic, but he also recognizes the limits of human reason and admits it must sometimes be open to other forms of intuition, inspiration, or transcendence. For him, rationality is a means, not an end: it must lead to awakening of the soul, not merely to intellectual exercise. This duality shows that truth, for him, could come both from reason and from a form of irrational revelation. Though he founded philosophy on logical questioning, Socrates also believed in divine signs, dreams, and supernatural intuition, elements often overshadowed by his image as a rationalist. For some scholars, his trances, his daimonion, and his ability to "die before dying" (through meditation) evoke shamanic practices. His philosophy would then be a spiritual quest, not only an intellectual one. Socrates seems to be a thinker at the frontier of the rational and the irrational, blending dialectic with mystical experiences.

The famous "Allegory of the Cave" illustrates this Platonic ambiguity. In *The Republic*, Socrates describes to Glaucon prisoners chained in a cave since birth, seeing only shadows on a wall. For them, the shadows are reality. One prisoner, however, frees himself, painfully discovers the outside world and the true light, the sun, symbol of the Good. But when he returns to free the others, they mock him, then kill him. Here one perceives Plato's awareness of the violent dimension of this account: a violence in emerging from the cave, and a violence in returning. Paradoxically, reason enacts violence, but reason is also violated by opinion.

It seems Plato invented this story, but it bears influences: the Eleusinian Mysteries, Greek secret rites involving symbolic descent into darkness followed by illumination; the Pythagorean view of the world as a prison for the soul,

freed through ultimate knowledge (mathematics); Orphism, which taught that the soul is trapped in the body and must escape through purification. Yet Socrates presents this tale as a useful fiction, an analogy, not a traditional myth. Still, the allegory was later reinterpreted in irrational or esoteric contexts, by Neoplatonists like Plotinus, or by Gnostics, with the theme of the soul's transmutation. Thus, while rooted in the sacred, Plato transformed it into a pillar of reason, yet retaining its mysterious aura.
This madness-wisdom in the Socratic tradition can be experienced as a form of violence because it disrupts the self's habitual, comfortable relationship with reality and knowledge. Socrates confronts his interlocutors with experiences and insighs that force them to question their identity, certainty, and cultural norms, bringing instability instead of reassurance. It can be experienced as a form of violence, as a rupture imposed on the soul. This intellectual shock is not just a gentle awakening: it unsettles the boundaries of self, reason, and tradition, compelling individuals to wrestle with the abyss opened by profound insights. Platonic "divine madness" claims the soul must sometimes break free of ordinary logic in order to truly awaken. Socrates demonstrates that inspiration, Eros, or prophecy can shatter established rational frameworks, making even the philosopher dependent on experiences that are, by their very nature, uncontrollable and disruptive. Such madness does not caress, it shakes and wounds, exposing people to the terrifying possibility that everything they believe might be incomplete or false.

As an existential violence. this madness-wisdom strips away illusions, comforts, and any defenses, compelling the soul to confront its ignorance, finitude, and yearning for truth. Those who experience it may feel bewildered, humiliated, or cut off, as Alcibiades confesses in The Symposium. Socrates' own trances, daimonion, and paradoxical serenity in the face of death are not just serene

ascents but also deep ruptures in the fabric of normality. The transformation Socrates demands is never painless, it is a dangerous, sometimes violent leap beyond ordinary existence into the liminal zone where philosophy, inspiration, and madness converge.

To be confronted with the limits of one's reason, with the strange presence of divine signs, dreams, and inspirations, is to feel something tremble inside oneself, a destabilization that can be felt as an assault. His madness-wisdom destabilizes the boundaries we build between reason and the irrational, between mastery and vulnerability. It violates the neat separation between the rational ego and the forces that exceed it. This disturbance can provoke resistance, anger, or even hatred, as in the allegory of the cave: the liberated prisoner is rejected, mocked, and killed. In this sense, the philosopher's gesture is violent because it exposes us to what we do not want to see or know, to what exceeds our categories, it breaks the pact of comfort between thought and the world. Even Socrates' serene relation to death can be experienced as a kind of provocation, a scandalous calm that shatters our instinctive attachment to life. His wisdom is not soft, consoling wisdom; it is cutting, like a blade that separates illusion from clarity. It is not surprising that such "madness" appears dangerous: it threatens the fragile equilibrium of collective certainties and personal identities.

## SUMMARY

After a long pompous speech, Socrates asks his interlocutor: *"Can you summarize your thought in a few clear words?"* He demands here a concise formulation, without ornament. The interlocutor then realizes that his speech

has not really been understood. Perhaps it was truly incomprehensible, too complicated, vacuous or confused. Or perhaps simply that Socrates is mocking him. In any case, it is always a difficult task to accomplish, especially for a mind that is undisciplined or poorly articulated. And if the person is sensitive, he may easily take offense at this request, which still remains a form of criticism, however veiled it may be. And eloquent speakers often find ways to feel offended, since they seek above all to please. This requirement for clarity and brevity is fundamental to his dialectical method: he pushes his interlocutors to express a definition, to give a clear formulation of what they are defending, so that he can then examine it rationally or refute its ambiguities. In many dialogues, he invites them to formulate a clear thesis, a simple definition or proposition, etc. For example, he frequently asks: "Can you say it briefly?", "Tell me in simple terms what you mean", or "Do you want us to start again from the beginning, in an orderly fashion?" This requirement forces the interlocutor to reduce the discourse to its essentials, to clarify it and sometimes to reduce it to a formula that can be examined publicly and dialectically, and this is a key step in Socratic maieutics.

However, a request for a summary may seem to ignore or minimize the importance and richness of the developed discourse, the orator's talent. It can be interpreted as a negation of the intellectual or emotional effort invested by the speaker. Or felt as an implicit criticism of excess complexity or length, an excess of intellectualism, which can wound the ego or intellectual pride of its author. Such a request implies that part or all of the discourse is judged too convoluted or not clear enough. For the speaker, it may give the impression that the refinement of his words has not been sufficiently heard or taken into account, and felt as an unfair reduction of his thought, even a subtle form of censorship. It can mean that his speaking time has been judged excessive. It

may be experienced as an infringement on his right to full expression, a violation of his intellectual integrity. It can be frustrating, as the speaker may feel that his effort to articulate his ideas has not been fully recognized. This impression can be particularly painful if the speaker is already anxious, or if he seeks too much validation from his audience. Reducing his speech to a mere summary deprives him of the overall recognition of his contribution. The request for a summary can seem to reduce a nuanced and complex discourse to a simplistic or caricatured version, producing an effect of brutal simplification. It may be perceived as a betrayal of the original content, or an attempt to bring it down to a lower level. A request for a summary could be felt as an attempt to reduce a rich and elaborate thought to a mere "practical hunch", which can frustrate the speaker. If the request for a summary is made because the audience feels overwhelmed or confused, it can be felt as an indirect accusation of lack of clarity or accessibility in the speaker's discourse. And if this incomprehension is attributed solely to the speaker, and not to the intellectual limits of the audience, it may create a sense of injustice. The very act of asking for a summary may also represent an infringement on the recognition of the orator. A long speech is often a way for the speaker to share his worldview, his experiences or his emotions. Asking for a summary may seem to deny the value of this effort. It can be interpreted as a questioning of the speaker's ability to express himself clearly or to structure his ideas, which may be perceived as a personal attack. For example, if someone speaks passionately about a subject dear to him, asking for a summary may seem to say: *"What you are saying is not important enough to deserve my full attention."*

The perception of violence depends largely on the context and the "hidden" intention behind the request for a summary. Certainly, it can be seen as a way

to strengthen mutual understanding. But if the request is made abruptly or in a peremptory tone, it risks being perceived as a personal attack. And above all, if the speaker does not trust himself or his audience, it will be "taken as an offense". Some people are particularly attached to their discourse and may perceive any form of reduction as an offense, such as Plato's sophists, who make a profession of erudition and wisdom. If the request comes from a person in an intellectual position of authority, it will be felt even more as a questioning of the legitimacy or competence of the speaker. This is where the ironic posture of an "ignorant" Socrates sows confusion because of the ambiguity of his status, both humble and daring. And knowing this, one could accuse Socrates of violence, for he does not take into account the sensitivity of the orator, he disregards the context and the speaker's status. One would not dare ask for a summary from a person revered or admired, even though such a request is, in principle, always legitimate. In short, a request for a summary is not intrinsically violent, but it can become so if it denies the importance of the speaker's process of thinking and expression, or if the speaker perceives it as such.

## INTERRUPTION

Socrates regularly practiced what can be called a tactical interruption in dialogue, whether in public or private. For example, Socrates would cut in as soon as his interlocutor made a vague generalization, such as *"Virtue is the good",* when he used an important term without defining it, like *"justice"* or *"courage",* or when he tried to bury the issue under a flood of words. Thus, when Protagoras gave a long speech saying: *"Virtue can be taught, for the Athenians…"* Socrates interrupted him with: *"Wait! What do you mean by*

*virtue? Is it one thing or many?"* The immediate effect was to unsettle the orator.

For an orator, seeing the whole of his argument interrupted in order to question fragments can feel like being misunderstood or betrayed in his effort to construct a coherent argument. A speech usually follows a narrative or logical flow that guides the audience through a progression of ideas. Interruption breaks this flow and may be felt as violent because the orator loses control over the way his discourse is constructed, received, and interpreted, it breaks the intended effect. Moreover, from his point of view, interruption can seem arbitrary, especially if imposed abruptly, without regard for the rhythm or structure of the speech. Cutting him off in mid-course to isolate a phrase or idea he considers minor can give the impression that his effort to articulate nuances is being ignored. Such interruption can be experienced as an indirect form of censorship, where the audience imposes its own temporal or attentional limits without regard for the speaker's project and needs.

At times, Socrates interrupts the orator to point out an internal contradiction, which may be considered even more aggressive, since it implicitly means that the speech makes no sense. For example, in the *Gorgias*: *"You say that injustice is shameful, but that committing injustice is worse than suffering it… How can both be true?"* At that point, the interlocutor had to either retract or entangle himself in explanations he was likely unable to provide.

Such behavior could be deemed unbearable, in ancient Greece as much as today. It represented a violation of social codes, for in Athens, letting the other speak was an implicit rule, not so different from our contemporary world, where "sensitivity" and "respect" are formal requirements. Such interruptions

forced the adversary to think on the spot, without a safety net, whereas his speech was carefully prepared for maximum effect, a challenge that for some speakers is nearly impossible. Each interruption thus exposed the flaws in the discourse, provoking emotional reactions. For example, Thrasymachus in *The Republic*: "By Zeus! Another one of your habits, Socrates! You never let anyone answer, and you ask question after question, without ever teaching anything yourself!". In *The Symposium*, he interrupts Agathon in the middle of his impassioned praise of Eros to ask him: "Tell me, Agathon, is Eros the love of something, or is he the love of nothing?"

In *Gorgias*, he interrupts Polos, a young rhetorician who attempts to defend the idea that rhetoric is a useful power, in order to ask: "Tell me, Polos, if a man uses rhetoric to harm others, is he a good rhetorician?" " Polus, thrown off balance, replies that he is not, and, confused, ends up admitting that rhetoric can be dangerous, which was not his initial intention. In Euthyphron, Socrates interrupts Euthyphron to highlight a contradiction: "Tell me, Euthyphron, is what is pious pious because the gods love it, or do the gods love it because it is pious?" And Euthyphron, unable to provide a coherent definition, ends up "running away" saying, "Another time, Socrates! I'm in a hurry. " In Meno, he interrupts Meno as usual with a question: "But first tell me, Meno, what is virtue? Without that, how can we know if it can be taught?" Meno, frustrated, replies that he does not know how to define virtue, which allows Socrates to show him the importance of definition before any discussion. Socrates was the master of *"Wait a moment!"*, turning every dialogue into a kind of intellectual chess game, a test. Yet his interruptions were not impolitenesses, but the cuts of a logical scalpel, which inevitably provoked chaos. But if the orator trusted himself and others, if he accepted that monologue turn into dialogue, if he could lightly play along, he would have no

real reason to take offense. At least, it would serve as a way to ensure he was truly in phase with his audience, unless, of course, they abused the dialogue to launch into rhetorical combat.

## LOGON DIDONAI

The Greek expression *“logon didonai”* is a key term in the Socratic method, literally meaning “to give an account” or “to give a reason”, in the sense of providing a rational justification. For Socrates, it is the fundamental requirement of philosophy: every assertion must be subjected to critical examination and supported by coherent arguments. This expression appears in several Platonic dialogues to describe the obligation to justify one’s beliefs by reason, and not by authority, belief, or custom. Socrates demands that his interlocutors “give an account” of their opinions. For example, in the *Laches*: *"Tell me, Laches, what is courage? For if you cannot explain what it is, how can you know who is courageous?*" On one hand, he unsettles his interlocutor by showing that the initial definitions he provides are inadequate or contradictory. For example, when courage is defined as *“not being afraid”,* Socrates asks: *“So, Laches, is a man who endures a foolish undertaking without fear courageous? For example, is a madman who fearlessly throws himself into a well, thinking he is doing the right thing, courageous?”* Thus the interlocutor must reformulate his thought to respond to this “summons”.

The philosophical implications of this principle are significant. It is already a criticism of dogmatism, since no idea is accepted without proof, against the sophists who champion rhetorical persuasion. But it is also a work on oneself, an introspection, a duty toward oneself linked to “Know thyself.” For “The

unexamined life is not worth living", and *logon didonai* is precisely what that examination entails. The connection with the maieutic is essential, for if it is a matter of "bringing forth" minds, it also requires that they produce a viable *logos*. In the *Theaetetus* Socrates says: *"My art, Theaetetus, is like that of midwives. I am not wise myself, and I have no knowledge to impart. But I know how to help others give birth to their own thoughts, and I can discern whether what they produce is a living reality or a mere phantom without substance."* Here one must distinguish between mere interpretation of an idea and rational justification of that idea, giving an account through logical reasoning, which is more rigorous and demanding than explaining or commenting. Thus, ideas produced must be tested or transformed through this trial by reason. *Logon didonai* therefore consists in engaging individuals in dialogue to critically examine their beliefs, hypotheses, and assertions, and though it aims at intellectual clarity and self-awareness, it can be experienced as violent.

The Socratic interrogative method forces individuals to confront contradictions, inconsistencies, or gaps in their reasoning. For many, this experience is destabilizing because it exposes their ignorance or the lack of coherence in their beliefs. This exposure can seem like an intellectual assault, for it undermines their confidence and erodes their authority. By making someone aware of his own lack of reflection, the Socratic questioning may provoke shame, frustration, or even anger. The discomfort arises because Socrates demands that his interlocutors articulate their thoughts clearly and logically, revealing flaws they would prefer to ignore. Exposing someone's intellectual weaknesses can seem aggressive or destabilizing, especially if the individual is not ready or refuses to engage in deep introspection. Some people perceive any criticism or problematization of their ideas as a personal attack.

Socrates often targeted prominent figures of Athenian society, considered authorities in their fields. By exposing their lack of understanding or wisdom, he unsettled social hierarchies and challenged established norms. This disruption could be perceived as a form of symbolic violence, as it threatened the social and intellectual standing of his interlocutors and undermined the existing cultural order. His insistence on questioning the wisdom of those who claimed to hold important truths led to accusations that he corrupted the youth and undermined traditional values, a threat to the stability of Athenian society.

The Socratic method involves a dialectical process in which the interlocutor is constantly pushed to refine or abandon his initial positions. In a sense, Socrates invites the individual to renounce himself, a process that, from his perspective, is entirely “healthy”. But for some characters, this effort seems insurmountable or excessive. For the “self”, the affirmation or protection of identity, is the principal obstacle to thinking. Abandoning one’s certainties, even temporarily, requires a kind of courage and openness that is not always available. This naturally produces psychological discomfort, frustration, even anger. Socratic questions often strip away the façade of knowledge, leaving interlocutors feeling exposed or humiliated. This psychological effect is repeatedly staged in Plato’s dialogues, where Socrates’ interlocutors often react defensively when their arguments are dismantled. The demand for *logon didonai* can easily seem intrusive or invasive, for human beings, greatly concerned with their appearance and reputation, tend to perceive it as a personal attack rather than a pleasant or interesting intellectual exercise.

Socrates operates under the assumption that rationality and logical coherence are essential to producing and verifying meaningful discourse. However, this

imposition of rational standards may clash with other modes of thinking, such as intuition, emotion, or tradition. By insisting on rational explanations and logical consistency, Socrates may alienate those who prefer non-rational forms of understanding, whether from laziness, lack of practice, convenience, or inclination. This imposition of rationality can be perceived as a form of intellectual violence, as it ignores or devalues other ways of knowing and being. For example, someone who relies on emotional or intuitive thinking might find Socrates' emphasis on logic and proof alienating or dismissive of his perspective.

This is the case of Ion the rhapsode, in the *Ion*, a poet who recites and interprets epic poetry. He claims to be an expert in Homeric poetry and to perfectly understand the divine and human intentions expressed in these texts. Yet, when questioned by Socrates, it becomes evident that he does not possess a rational or coherent understanding of what he does. He relies mainly on emotional impressions and intuitions, invoking divine inspiration to explain his art. The dialogue forces Ion to abandon his subjective certainties and face the limits of his understanding. For him, this confrontation is difficult to accept, as it undermines not only his expertise but also his self-image as an inspired artist, a striking case showing how the Socratic method can be perceived as violent. Often, Socrates' interlocutors do not understand or do not wish to understand what he seeks, the demand is too great, the consequences too heavy. For example, in *The Republic*, Thrasymachus reacts angrily to Socrates' questions, accusing him of playing with words and refusing to engage in a serious debate. This resistance is often psychological in origin, for this invitation to rational dialogue, a rather slow and laborious enterprise, admittedly, is interpreted as a waste of time, but more importantly as a personal attack, and for the notables as a rejection of their intellectual authority. Although Socrates' intention is to

foster intellectual growth and self-awareness, the process of "giving an account" seems like an attack on the beliefs, identity, and social standing of his interlocutors.

Another type of reaction to the Socratic challenge is absence, generally from lack of energy or interest in reflective dialogue. Such is the case of Philebus in the dialogue of the same name. There the discussion concerns his thesis that pleasure is the supreme good. Yet he remains entirely passive, consistent with his "indolent" thesis. By this stylistic choice, Plato, in denying Philebus speech, highlights the dogmatic and unreflective character of the hedonist position. Philebus thus becomes an almost caricature-like figure, yet typical of those who do not wish to engage in reflective dialogue, intellectual weariness or inability to keep up with Socrates' rigorous demands.

In several dialogues, some interlocutors show signs of fatigue or discouragement at the complexity of his questions, a passive resistance to dialectical engagement. For example, Callicles in the *Gorgias*. Though a formidable adversary, he eventually disengages from the debate by refusing to answer Socrates' questions. It seems the intellectual pressure becomes too great for him, and he prefers to withdraw rather than continue defending his positions. Or Thrasymachus in *The Republic*, a passionate and provocative adversary, who defends the idea that "justice is the interest of the stronger", defined as an instrument of power. At first, he appears engaged in the debate, ready to confront Socrates with vehemence and confidence. But as the dialogue progresses, he tires, becomes increasingly passive. After being confronted with several logical contradictions in his thesis, he stops responding actively and simply lets Socrates continue without him. Others prefer to yield completely to Socrates, such as Glaucon in *The Republic*. While he intervenes frequently in the early books, his contributions gradually diminish, and he is

reduced to merely acquiescing to Socrates' arguments without contesting them further, showing signs of disengagement or intellectual fatigue, a kind of surrender. Or Laches, in the *Laches*. He begins the discussion, but as it progresses, after his initial definitions are invalidated by Socrates, he shows signs of disengagement or fatigue, and gives up.

It is also possible that some interlocutors formally concede to the "truth of reason" but in reality yield only to be left in peace by Socrates. Feeling ill-suited to rhetoric, they may later react with resentment, or conversely, fall into a childlike admiration for the power Socrates exerts over others through his mastery of language. These interlocutors all maintain a significant relationship with power, which becomes their main lens of interpretation. Thus, the fact of pushing his interlocutors to their limits, of forcing them to give an account of their discourse, and thus of themselves, until emotional or intellectual exhaustion, may be seen as a form of violence, unless one takes it as a salutary challenge.

## FORCING TO SPEAK

"You're just having fun forcing me to say things I don't believe! This sentence comes from Plato's *Gorgias*. It is spoken by Callicles, one of Socrates' main opponents, accusing Socrates of playing with words and forcing him to say things he does not want to say. He expresses this idea when Socrates, by using his dialectical method based on short questions and answers, pushes him to admit contradictions within his own speech. Indeed, Socrates, when facing his oponents, does not simply respond to them directly, he questions them to reveal the flaws and inconsistencies in their arguments. In doing so, he puts

Callicles in an uncomfortable position where the latter is compelled to admit points that weakens his reasoning, thus he protests against Socrates' "violence", as he feels humiliated and disarmed by Socrates' dialectic. He generally ends up abandoning the debate or responding sarcastically, as he can no longer defend his positions as he wants. Thrasymachus, in The Republic, defends the idea that "justice is the interest of the strongest", and Socrates constantly interrupts him to highlight the contradictions in his argument. Thrasymachus, exasperated, reacts angrily: 'By Heracles! You only ask questions without ever answering them yourself! You force me to say things I don't want to say! " In *Euthyphro*, the latter, a soothsayer, attempts to define piety for Socrates. But Socrates dismantles each definition proposed with counterexamples. Euthyphro ends up feeling trapped and unwilling to answer, retorting, "Socrates, you are forcing me to say things that I do not satisfy me!" In Meno, the latter asks Socrates whether virtue can be taught. Socrates interrupts him to ask him to first define what virtue is, and Meno, frustrated, ends up replying: 'Socrates, you are forcing me to say things that I do not understand myself!'

Those moment illustrates well the power of the Socratic method, which consists of using reason and logic to destabilize opposing positions and bring truth to light. By pushing his interlocutors to rigorously reflect on his own words, Socrates shows how the charges against him rest mostly on vague generalities or unresolved contradictions. This situation drives Callicles and others to voice their frustration. He does not really understand what is happening, or does not wish to understand, because the consequences are too overwhelming for him, being so emotionally and intellectually invested in proving Socrates' wrong. He feels that Socrates is manipulating the discussion to trap him. We cannot know whether he truly believes this or whether he is

acting in bad faith. It seems that he could be capable of understanding, since he is not a fool, and in any case, as Descartes wrote, “Good sense is the best distributed thing in the world…”, though the rest of his phrase is somewhat ironic. For Callicles, it seems to be manipulation driven by bad intent, because he *feels* Socrates’ pressure as an intellectual aggression. Yet, as the reader can see, Socrates is merely analyzing Callicles’ thesis and demonstrating that his argumentation rest on vague generalities and unresolved contradictions. Those irritated remarks perfectly illustrates the tension between two opposing visions. On the one hand, Socrates’ point of view: he uses dialectics to make truth emerge and highlight the gaps in his accusers’ arguments. In doing so, he does not seek to harm but to clarify and educate. On the other hand, the opponents’ point of view, who perceives Socrates’ questions as a strategy to force him to betray their own positions, which they interprets as a form of manipulation or bad intent. This exclamation of Callicles shows how the Socratic method can be perceived as disturbing or even aggressive by those who are not ready to face the rigor of rational analysis. But one can also argue in favor of Socrates’ opponents, explaining that he abuses a technique which is uniquely his own, mastered with dexterity, and which therefore makes him “unbeatable”.

This is precisely what Schopenhauer explicitly denounces in his work *The Art of Always Being Right*, where he offers a cynical analysis of rhetorical techniques used to win debates even when one is wrong. He denounces the Socratic method as a sterile dialectic, purely negative, destroying opinions without constructing positive truth, confusing refutation with wisdom. Nietzsche will take up this theme, showing that reason is nothing but a mask of the will to power. According to him, reason is not a purely objective or disinterested faculty; it serves deeper and instinctive forces that drive living beings to assert

their existence, to dominate, to create and to transcend their limits, often used to justify desires, instincts, or ambitions tied to this will to power, and even less avowable motives such as fear, weakness, or resentment. Thus, the apology of reason becomes a negation of life. Kierkegaard, on the contrary, will make Socrates into a model of authentic subjectivity. And Derrida analyzes the Socratic deconstruction both as a poison that ruins certainties and a remedy that frees thinking.

The criticism “You force me to say what I do not want to say” opposes external constraint to inner will, an interiority that Socrates fractures by the power of reasoning. By forcing the other, through reason, to publicly state what he does not wish to say, he embodies the violence of necessity against singular desire, more arbitrary. It is therefore a matter of determining whether this formal and categorical demand of reason is legitimate in itself, or whether indeed it amounts to an arbitrary imposition, a mere manipulative technique. His power over the adversary is indeed devastating: he can genuinely oblige the other to “say what he does not want to say”. However, this phrase can be interpreted in two different ways. Either: “What you make me say, or what you want me to say, does not at all correspond to my words and intentions.” Or: “You force me to confess what I do not wish to confess”, like a policeman interrogating a suspect with insidious questions, carefully examining overlaps, silences, and contradictions. In any case, this mode of questioning definitely exerts a kind of power, which may or may not be qualified as “ill-intentioned” or violent, depending on the interpretation chosen earlier. And we often see Socrates’ interlocutors stammer, get confused, become angry, leave the “scene”, or simply “submit to the truth” that emerges, depending on their degree of trust in Socrates, the weight of their initial intentions, their openness of mind, their reasoning capacity, etc. As we see in different philosophers, opinions are

divided on how to perceive this practice and make sense of such exchanges. In general, it must be remembered that Socrates is guided by *parrhesia*, a Greek philosophical concept that designates the courage to speak truth frankly, without detour, even at the risk of displeasing, free and sincere speech, often associated with political or philosophical frankness. It is a moral duty: to tell the truth out of ethical concern, even at the risk of consequences, without being determined by them. Thus, the *parrhesiast* takes the risk of confronting the powerful and puts himself in danger. He assumes the discomfort of his position and distinguishes himself from the pedagogue or the sage, whose stances are much more comfortable and consensual.

But, ironically, this Socratic "free" speech is periodically interrupted by a kind of inner voice (*daimonion* or demon), a divine inspiration, which warns him negatively, to censor him. That is to say, it never dictates what he must do, but stops him when he is about to make a mistake. For example, in *The Apology*, Socrates explains that his "divine sign" often restrained him when he was about to speak in public, thus saving him from dangers. It does not give him orders but prevents him from acting when it would be a bad decision. This self-censorship can be seen as a form of the Delphic "Nothing in excess", an invitation to wisdom, to temperance, in other words, a prohibition against excess that in some way defines Socrates. It can therefore be seen as a form of moral conscience, a metaphor for intuitive reason. But it can also be seen as the sign of a mystical experience, showing, according to Plato, that Socrates acts under higher inspiration, distinguishing him from sophists. Socrates' demon is a voice of negative wisdom, a divine warning that prevents him from error, but never imposes an action. Through this negative function, the *daimonion* works as a kind of apophatic wisdom, because it guides by removing, not by adding. For Socrates, this imposed silence shows that he

obeys the gods, contrary to what his accusers claim. It is a form of inverted divine communication: a sacred "no" rather than a command to act. In *Phaedrus*, his *daimonion* stops him and compels him to return to his words to correct a philosophical mistake: "I must not go away until I have expiated my fault toward the divinity", he says, showing his sacred view of discourse as bearer of truth. But the demon never speaks directly to Socrates; it never explicitly says "Be silent", but blocks his speech like an inner brake. It acts like a spiritual intuition that prevents him from committing impiety or clumsiness. This forced silence is often tied to key moments, during trials or critical debates. Thus lies the irony for Socrates: he who generally "forces others to speak" is himself forced not to speak, to fall silent, or to revise what he has said.

## SILENCE

"Calculated silence" is another common Socratic technique in the process of refutation, a significant moment, although it is not explicitly described under this name in the classical texts. Socrates often brings his interlocutors to silence, not through intimidation, but because they realize their inability to respond coherently to his questions, becoming aware of their contradictions or the inconsistency of their ideas: he reduces them to silence, or at least to a long hesitation. As well, in Plato's dialogues, Socrates often uses pauses or silences after having led his interlocutor to a point of confusion or embarrassment. In *The Apology*, Plato describes how Socrates confronts sophists, politicians, and other supposedly wise men. After having demonstrated their contradictions, he often lets silence linger, allowing his audience and interlocutor to reflect on what has just been revealed. This silence is strategic: it marks a break in the

interlocutor's thinking, creating an opportunity for deeper questioning. It is not simply an absence, but a pedagogical tool designed to accentuate the effect of intellectual disorientation, the awareness of aporia, to urge both the interlocutor and the reader to reflect more deeply on their own claims, to create a somewhat theatrical tension in which everyone is pushed to seek an answer or to acknowledge their limits. In this perspective, silence can be seen as a way to reinforce criticism, by allowing the interlocutor to measure for himself the inadequacy of his arguments. The silence that follows a challenge can indeed accentuate the interlocutor's embarrassment. However, this embarrassment is not an end in itself for Socrates, but rather a means of provoking awareness. Silence is part of a "thinking in motion", as it invites the interlocutor to step out of his intellectual comfort zone and to seek beyond appearances.

The calculated silence of Socrates also reflects his own admission of ignorance. By remaining silent after having put his interlocutor in difficulty, Socrates shows that he has no intention of dominating the discussion or imposing his ideas. On the contrary, he encourages the other to continue the reflection by himself, in a spirit of humility and common search for truth. Although Socrates does not systematically use this technique, he naturally exploits moments of silence to amplify the impact of his questions, to guide his interlocutors toward genuine introspection, and to create a space for reflection.

Let us take a few examples where Plato describes significant silences in his dialogues, which are not mere pauses, but dramatic and meaningful tools. In the *Laches*, after Socrates has dismantled one by one the definitions of courage proposed by Laches and Nicias, the general Laches, overwhelmed and frustrated, exclaims: "By Zeus, Socrates, I really don't know what to say anymore! Everything I proposed, you have reduced to rubble." Then he falls

silent, unable to find a satisfactory answer. This silence marks the aporia, the dialectical impasse, a key moment in which the interlocutor is forced to realize his ignorance and impotence. In the *Gorgias*, the sophist Polus remains mute after Socrates has overturned his arguments. His silence betrays his powerless anger, a silence born of shame or confusion, where Plato wishes to show that sophistic rhetoric collapses in the face of dialectic. In *The Republic*, Thrasymachus falls silent after being refuted. His silence symbolizes the defeat of his thesis on immoralism. Certainly, some silences are less emotional and forced, and more contemplative.

For example, in *Symposium*, "You are mocking, Socrates, said Agathon ... Socrates took his place on the couch, and supped with the rest ... Then, Socrates questioned Agathon on his speech, examining what he had said before making his own address." This describes the process, as Socrates does not immediately launch into his own discourse, but after stopping to eat, he takes time to question Agathon first, in a deliberate dialectic; his pause, slow pace and engagement are built into the dramatic rhythm of the Symposium. Socrates' pauses are theatrical and symbolic, marking a transition between the superficial and poetic speeches of the other guests and his own philosophical depth. In another passage of the same text, Aristodemus says Socrates “was lost in thought” outside, “standing in the doorway” and “remained there for quite a while.” Even when called inside, he “stood motionless, apparently thinking over something”, while the guests wait patiently for him to join. Plato emphasises Socrates' physical immobility, which reflects his spiritual contemplation and recalls other moments when Socrates enters a contemplative trance. These silences or retreats may emphasise the depth and difficulty of the question, but they can also be seen as a psychological

manoeuvre to contrast the difference in nature between individual behaviors and speeches and incite interlocutors to reflection.

In *Phaedrus*, after hearing the myth of the winged chariot as an analogy for the soul, Phaedrus does not respond. His silence suggests an inner transformation, a kind of revelation. The beauty of the myth surpasses words, silence becomes eloquent, but once again Socrates asserts himself through speech. On a pedagogical level, these silences compel the reader to think for himself, just as Socrates' interlocutors do. They represent a breath in the dialectical process. And silence points toward the unsayable, for in the absolute, the "Ideas" cannot be spoken, they can only be contemplated. Plato also uses silence as a literary weapon to intensify emotion. Silences are then not voids, but dramatic pivots revealing the limits of language and the power of thinking. "Speech is the shadow of silence", as the Neoplatonic interpretation puts it. Nevertheless, silence in the Platonic dialogues can indeed represent a form of symbolic violence, even though this violence is often subtle and philosophically fruitful. In the *Gorgias*, the silence of Polus or Callicles after their refutation is not a serene peace, but the collapse of their identity, their authority. Socrates reduces them to muteness, exposing their intellectual impotence. This silence is a public defeat, a blow to their pride, a humiliation. Nietzsche indeed sees in Socrates a "dialectical executioner". At the end of *Euthyphro*, Socrates refutes each definition proposed, and Euthyphro ultimately fails to answer the question "What is piety?" Instead of offering recourse or consolation, Socrates presses the inquiry until Euthyphro is left with no answer, and the "wise" seer admits defeat with a brief excuse: "Another time, Socrates; for I am in a hurry, and must go now." It is a habitual strategy of his, which can be called a violence by the dialectical imposition of aporia, a state of critical perplexity that reveals an insoluble contradiction, forcing the interlocutor to recognize his

ignorance and remain silent. Like a surgeon cutting without anesthesia, Socrates imposes the truth, or "his truth", without leniency. In *The Republic*, Thrasymachus' silence after his "defeat" is an act of surrender before Socratic logic, which becomes hegemonic. The Platonic dialogue is a battlefield where the silence of the vanquished consecrates the philosopher's domination.

On a more metaphysical level, one can mention the "silence of the Ideas", these forms perceived as unconditional realities beyond words, as "anhypothetical", ineffable and foundational concepts. Reason leads to the threshold of the Good, but only intellectual intuition grasps it, like a spark that flashes after long effort. In *The Symposium*, initiation to the Idea of supreme Beauty ends with a "sacred" silence, for language fades before the inexpressible. Or in *The Republic*, where the "Good", the fundamental concept, lies "beyond being". Its silence is absolute, for it cannot be defined; it is a violence inflicted upon language itself. The philosopher must renounce words to contemplate "truth", a brutal asceticism. Plato justifies this rigor, the necessity of violence, by the requirement of "purification of the soul". Dialectical violence heals illusion, as in the "allegory of the cave". Both by the wrenching away from the world of appearances, described as painful, and by the dramatic return of the purified soul into the cave, an allusion to the condemnation of Socrates. The demand for truth confronts mental comfort, which is an obstacle to wisdom. But this violence is indeed problematic. Foucault sees in it a play of power, where the philosopher masters the rules of dialogue and imposes his technique on his victims. Levinas denounces a violence of "totalization", for Socrates does not allow his interlocutor to express himself outside his particular logic: the "Other" is ignored or brutalized. Indeed, if silence in Plato is a fruitful violence, for it breaks certainties to open to truth, it is also a "political" violence, for it consecrates the incontestable

authority of the philosopher. “Every birth is cruel”, says Heraclitus, and Socratic maieutics is no exception. And indeed, can one bring forth minds without hurting them?

The silence following a tight interrogation creates a particular feeling that Heidegger calls *Unheimlich*: the moment when the familiar, meanings, and acquired routines collapse. It is no longer being at home, through the brutal exposure of the Self and its defamiliarization. For it is a matter of making the familiar strange in order to force the subject to see the world from a new angle, suddenly feeling like a stranger to himself. This “uncanny strangeness” explains why such silence is unbearable for some.

The silence imposed by Socrates through dialogue is not a mere void, but a collapse of certainties. The *Unheimlich* is the moment when the familiar world, certainties, social identity, or established beliefs, suddenly becomes foreign. This forced silence is not only experienced as radical defamiliarization, but as an ontological rupture. Thus, when Socrates reduces Euthyphro to silence (*Euthyphro*), the latter no longer recognizes his own beliefs about piety: he becomes a stranger to himself. The subject can no longer take refuge in automatic responses, dogmas, or prejudices. This silence is an existential baring, a loss of “home”. The subject, confronted with the absence of an ultimate foundation for his beliefs, experiences deep anxiety. This experience is unbearable for some, because it threatens identity. The self is built on stable narratives, such as “I am moral” or “I am courageous”. The Socratic questioning destroys these fictions by exposing their inconsistency, producing a vertiginous silence. According to Levinas, this produces an “ontological shame”, for it is not about being wrong, but about no longer knowing who one is. The Socratic maieutics sees this void as liberating, as a

preparation for truth, but for many, this “abyss” is unbearable. Certainly, this silence is imposed, not chosen. It reminds us that the subject is instrumentalized for a purpose that transcends him, for example a principle of truth or reason. In a modern resonance, it may be qualified as a form of epistemic violence, where dialectical authority denies the right to “opacity”. Foucault would analyze this silence as a disciplinary device, a technology of power, for Socrates controls the rhythm, the responses, and even the failures of dialogue. Silence is the admission of the interlocutor’s defeat, the proof of Socratic superiority. That said, in the *Gorgias*, Callicles refuses to play the game; his final silence is in fact a resistance to this hold. Indeed, one may also take it as a game, without caring about winning or losing, and this is precisely where the Socratic challenge lies: in playing seriously a game where one does not take oneself too seriously. The key is not to over-invest one’s little self.

The contemporary natural tendency, more psychological, for example like an adult with a child, would replace silence with active listening: not leaving the other without words, but helping him to produce an answer, or to reformulate his thought. Yet this “empathic” reaction can also be criticized, as another form of domination, softer and subtler. In many mystical traditions, silence precedes revelation, it is necessary for it. But generally it presupposes consent, unlike the Socratic interrogation, which intrudes unexpectedly. Thus, Socratic silence as the price of truth is unbearable because it is a symbolic death, a destruction of the illusory self, and a usurpation of speech, insofar as the philosopher masters the rules of the game and the dialogical process.

# DISSECTION OF SPEECH

In the *Gorgias*, Callicles, irritated, accuses Socrates of tearing apart his speech: “"You dissect speeches, Socrates, and break them up into little bits." Implicitly, he accuses Socrates as being a Sophist, since he deals with the discourse as a sophisticated rhetorical game, which corresponds to the way the Sophists operated. It is a rather ironic accusation, unconsciously, no doubt, for in it Callicles the sophist recognizes in Socrates the very training he once received in that school, and accuses him of using those techniques against him. He probably does not realize that Socrates has since changed course: he does use sophistic tools, but channeled toward the pursuit of truth. Thus, he dissects Callicles’ speech not to win some contest of eloquence, but to clarify its content and scope. The rhetorician therefore reproaches Socrates for employing dialectical tricks, fragmenting discussions to embarrass his interlocutors, instead of carrying out a sincere and global debate. This criticism reflects the conflict between Socratic philosophy, founded on the meticulous examination of concepts, and sophistic rhetoric, focused on persuasion and manipulation. Callicles here embodies the defense of a “morality” based on strength and power, opposed to the Socratic quest for truth through questioning. But in doing so he projects onto Socrates his own desire to “prevail” by any means, and thus to be violent.

It is true that an important aspect of Socrates’ strategy is to isolate each assertion contained in a long speech and examine it separately, in order to better reveal its inconsistencies. Or rather, to choose certain parts that seem revealing and significant, for he cannot linger on *everything*. And indeed, under the repeated blows of his questioning, the speech often disintegrates like a

poorly assembled puzzle. Frequently this happens because the key concept or proposition is shaky, ambiguous, or treated in a contradictory way. For very often, sophists hid their ignorance or their incoherencies behind long-winded tirades. Socrates thus exposed the emptiness beneath pompous verbosity, and the orator shifted from being a master of wisdom to a perplexed student within minutes. In this way, Socrates, masked under his “humility”, used logical and dialectical weapons, turning each dialogue into an intellectual trap. An effective but mortally irritating method. For instance, in the *Gorgias*, he dissects Polus’ rhetoric by showing that it conflates power and justice. Thus, in *The Apology*, after the flood of words from his accusers who insist with pathos that “Socrates corrupts the youth and does not believe in the gods!”, Socrates asks, "Who, then, is the one who makes youth better?", to which Meletus does not know how to respond. From that moment, the trial becomes a dialogue, and the accusers quickly contradict themselves. By acting in this way, he brings to light that the charges against him are vague, ill-defined, and rest on prejudice rather than on evidence. For example, the accusers claim that Socrates is a sophist, but they cannot explain clearly how his teachings would be harmful. They accuse him of not believing in the city’s gods, while at the same time claiming he introduces new divinities, without specifying anything. The dissection of an orator’s speech can be considered a form of symbolic violence for several reasons, particularly because of the psychological, social, and communicative implications such an intervention entails, especially its impact on the relationship between speaker and audience. Indeed, from this practice, some retain the suspicion of “bad intentions” in Socrates. When a speech is chopped into little pieces, when fragments are selectively taken, it creates an artificial fragmentation of the speaker’s thinking. A speech is generally a coherent whole, structured, where each element is articulated with

the others to form a unity. Dissection ignores this organic structure and risks decontextualizing ideas, which can lead to misinterpretations, or even distort the content. Or else it may give the impression that the discourse is simpler or less nuanced than it actually is. This fragmentation can be perceived as violent because it denies the intentional complexity of the speech. The speaker, seeing the globality of his discourse reduced to fragments, may feel misunderstood or betrayed in his effort to build a coherent argument. A speech usually follows a narrative or logical flow that guides the audience through a progression of ideas. Fragmenting it into small pieces can shatter this flow, and may be felt as violent because the speaker loses control over how his speech is received and interpreted, it breaks his intended effect. Especially since quite often audiences react more to the overall “massage” of a speech, its aesthetic impression, than to the specificity of the concepts invoked, unless they are provoked by a particular term or idea. Greek rhetoricians, moreover, played heavily on the card of oratorical seduction. If, for instance, a speaker develops a complex idea on a sensitive subject such as social justice or ethics, isolating one phrase or minor idea may give the impression that his effort to articulate nuances has been ignored. The incantatory effect of erudition disappears once one lingers on the actual content of what is said.

Dissection may also be perceived as an assault on the expressive autonomy of the speaker. The speaker generally chooses how to structure his discourse, which ideas to emphasize, and how to articulate them. Fragmentation imposed by an interlocutor or a third party can seem to deny this autonomy, as if the speaker had no right to express himself in his own terms. This can be particularly frustrating if the speaker seeks to share a personal vision or subjective experience. In such cases, dissection can be felt as an attempt to control or domesticate his expression.

Dissection of a speech can also reflect the imposition of external norms upon the way the speaker ought to express himself. If a speaker adopts a more narrative or philosophical style, dissection may be perceived as an attempt to force this style to conform to a supposedly "more effective" norm. Such imposition can be experienced as symbolic violence, because it denies the diversity of expressive modes and privileges a standardized format. By imposing an external norm, an outside intervention can give the impression that the speaker must bend to the audience's expectations, at the cost of his own authenticity.

Finally, dissection may be felt as a denial of the intellectual or emotional effort of the speaker. A long speech is often a way for the speaker to share his worldview, his experiences, or his emotions. To dissect this speech can seem to deny the value of that effort. It may be interpreted as a questioning of the speaker's capacity to express himself clearly or to structure his ideas, which may be perceived as a personal attack. Dissection may also affect the relationship between speaker and audience. If it is carried out abruptly or condescendingly, it can create distance or tension between the two parties. If performed respectfully and constructively, it may be perceived as a way to clarify ideas rather than to reduce them, but much depends on the attitude and self-confidence of the speaker. In some cases, dissection may be felt as a form of implicit censorship, where the audience imposes its own time or attention limits without considering the speaker's needs. This can engender a sense of injustice or frustration in the speaker.

In conclusion, we must note that for Socrates, dissection is an art, described in *Phaedrus*. For one does not cut up a concept, an idea, or a discourse just anyhow: one must look for its "natural articulations", its meaningful divisions.

In this, the work of the midwife is comparable to that of the butcher who carves the animal respecting its joints, dismembering without mutilating. Socrates criticises muddled thinkers, because "One must know how to cut each reality according to its natural joints, and not try to break any of its parts, like a bad butcher." He thus denounces those who fragment ideas arbitrarily, obscuring their essence, unlike those who identify the “objective” divisions of reality, such as logical species or ontological categories. For example, the dialectical method refers to two complementary operations: *synagoge*, which gathers things under the same genus, and *diairesis*, which divides genera progressively into species, just as one separates the limbs of an animal. The bad butcher chops at random, destroying the structure, while the good butcher follows the joints, preserving the internal order. Likewise, the dialectician must discern the real boundaries between concepts rather than confuse them. Thus the sophists mix everything together and sow confusion, whereas precise dissection leads to “intelligible forms”, pure ideas such as “Justice itself”. To midwife minds properly requires structuring reasoning, for a faulty division leads to error. To speak well demands to think well, and orators who ignore this art produce compelling but empty speeches. Dialectical dissection is an art of conceptual precision, as rigorous as anatomy. It reveals the order of reality, the key to true knowledge. That is why Socrates, like a philosopher-butcher, insists on the necessity of “cutting adroitly”, otherwise one produces nonsense.

## TAKING POWER

When reading Plato’s dialogues, one quickly notices that Socrates is the central figure, and that he exerts a certain power over his interlocutors, whether in private or public discussions. Even when the main character is someone other

than himself, an established authority, most often the sophists, Socrates always ends up gaining strong ascendancy over the discussion, over the general dynamic of the encounter. We may then wonder whether Socrates is in fact in search of power, without ever admitting it. Is he at the service of reason, or of the divine injunction, as he claims, or does he work on his own account, for personal satisfaction, through a kind of self-satisfaction in exercising power over others?

In the Platonic dialogues, Socrates rather appears as a character who seeks truth through the systematic questioning of his interlocutors. While one might see in this a certain form of intellectual domination, Socrates' intention seems far removed from any quest for personal, ideological, or political power. He seeks neither glory nor wealth, and his ascetic way of life contrasts sharply with the idea of material or political power. His influence lies rather in his ability to question relentlessly and to challenge established certainties. His method, the *elenchus*, aims at deconstructing certainties rather than imposing his own vision. Moreover, he will be criticized for this form of "nihilism" or excessive "skepticism". Far from seeking to rule, Socrates even affirms his ignorance, a paradoxical stance for anyone wishing to seize power, unless this admission is seen as a mere rhetorical stratagem.

Nevertheless, the Socratic *maieutic* establishes an asymmetry in the dialogical relationship, placing Socrates in the position of intellectual guide. This privileged position could be interpreted as a subtle form of power, the power to steer minds. Even though, unlike the sophists who monetized their teaching, Socrates drew no material benefit from his exchanges and systematically refused positions of authority, as he reminds us in *The Apology*. Thus, while Socrates undoubtedly exerted influence over his interlocutors, his philosophical

project seems more oriented toward intellectual emancipation than toward the pursuit of power. Yet one might still accuse him of using reason to secure a personal psychological power, since he wielded his mastery of logical reasoning to put his interlocutors in difficulty, often leading them to *aporia*, that intellectual dead-end where they acknowledge their ignorance. This dynamic undeniably creates a psychological asymmetry in which Socrates occupies the dominant position. His interrogative method can thus be seen as an instrument of psychological dominance, a kind of “spiritual” or “moral” power. Indeed, he inspired great admiration in some. By systematically exposing the contradictions in the thinking of his interlocutors while avoiding the exposition of his own doctrine, he held an unassailable position. His characteristic irony, feigning ignorance while revealing the weakness of others’ arguments, could be interpreted as a subtle strategy of domination.

However, this accusation runs up against several objections. First, Socrates claims to aim at the moral improvement of his fellow citizens rather than his own glorification. Second, unlike the sophists, he derives no material or political advantage from his dialogues. Finally, his philosophical project seems broadly oriented toward a collective search for truth rather than the establishment of personal power. The question nevertheless remains: is the psychological dominance that Socrates sometimes exerts a means in the service of a noble end, or an end in itself? If one examines historical testimonies (Xenophon, Aristophanes, or Diogenes Laërtius) and the Platonic dialogues, several elements suggest that this psychological dominance was more a means than an end. Socrates seems to use his dominant position in dialogue as a pedagogical tool, aiming to awaken his interlocutors to their own contradictions and to guide them toward more rigorous thinking. His philosophical project appears sincerely oriented toward the search for truth

and moral improvement. Socrates does not seek power, but the authority of truth, which is something entirely different. His “empire” is that of reasoned dialogue, not of force. The violence attributed to him is that of philosophical awakening itself, which unsettles in order to make one think. The fact that Socrates accepted his death sentence rather than renounce his philosophical mission or go into exile reinforces this interpretation. If his main goal had been to consolidate personal power, he would likely have adopted a more conciliatory attitude toward the Athenian authorities.

Yet the boundary between means and ends can be subtle. The intellectual satisfaction of demonstrating his dialectical superiority may well have constituted, consciously or not, a parallel motivation for Socrates. Certain passages in the dialogues, where he seems to take pleasure in confounding his interlocutors, could support this more critical reading. Ultimately, the truth probably lies in a dynamic tension: Socrates’ psychological dominance was mainly a means in the service of an authentic philosophical quest, but this position of power also carried psychological gratifications that could occasionally become ends in themselves. It can also be considered normal and legitimate that the accomplishment of a personal mission, the realization of our own power of being, should bring a certain enjoyment.

## EMOTIONS AND REASON

*We use here the term “emotions” employed by a common criticism of Socratic practice, even though, as an inheritance of modern psychology, it does not belong to the Socratic vocabulary proper. We shall employ it, for all practical purposes, to designate in an undifferentiated way the affects, impulses,*

*disturbances of the soul, or passions that Socrates evokes in Plato's dialogues.* A common criticism of Socrates, regarding his relationship to "emotions", is that he is accused of neglecting them. Is there not in him a fear of subjectivity? In this case, reason may be considered as a flight from emotional overflow, a denial of the emotions and of the trouble they provoke. This could reflect a need for excessive control. Before "working through" one's emotions, one must first be able to identify them. To ignore them risks denying them abusively. Thus contemporary critics, largely inspired by psychology, insist on the importance of identifying, accepting, and collaborating with emotions, whatever they may be, in order to gain a more complete understanding of human experience.

Certainly, Socrates privileges reason over emotions. Nevertheless, it seems useful to somewhat temper this vision of Socratic "rationalism". Socrates, as represented in Plato's dialogues, does not entirely reject these impulses of the soul. He acknowledges that some of them can be beneficial and play an important role in moral life. However, he insists that emotions must be guided by reason if they are to be truly useful and virtuous. He encourages certain ones, but only when they are aligned with wisdom and virtue. One example of a "moral" emotion for him is courage (*andreia*), which he describes as a cardinal virtue. Although it is above all a rational disposition, the capacity to face danger by following reason, it also involves an emotional dimension: inner strength to overcome fear or adversity. In the *Laches*, Socrates explores the nature of courage and shows that it must be guided by knowledge and reason to be truly virtuous. Another example is moderation (*sophrosyne*), which involves the control of excessive desires and unbridled passions. It is associated with a positive emotion: inner satisfaction and peace of mind that come from living in harmony with oneself. In *The Symposium*,

Socrates praises self-mastery as an essential condition for attaining wisdom and beauty. These “moral” emotions are encouraged by Socrates because they support virtue and contribute to a good and harmonious life. Socrates also grants great importance to a specific form of love, *Eros*, or philosophical love. In *The Symposium*, he presents *Eros* as a profound desire for beauty, truth, and wisdom. This type of love is not an irrational passion, but a noble aspiration that can guide the soul toward the good. Socratic *eros* is oriented toward the good and perfection: it transcends physical and material pleasures to focus on higher ideals. It is compatible with reason, for it leads to the pursuit of knowledge and virtue. Socrates thus encourages this form of love, which is both emotional and intellectual, because it inspires the individual to rise spiritually and morally.

Socrates also recognizes the value of a certain form of “fear”: the fear of acting wrongly or transgressing morality. This emotion can motivate a person to examine his or her actions and to seek to act justly. In *The Apology*, Socrates explains that he has devoted his life to questioning the Athenians in order to prompt them to reflect on their beliefs and actions. This approach rests on a legitimate concern: the fear of living in ignorance or committing injustice. However, this fear is not irrational or paralyzing. It is guided by reason and serves a moral purpose: to avoid evil and to seek the good. Likewise, he values the “intellectual joy” that accompanies the discovery of truth, an emotion intimately linked to philosophical practice. This quest for wisdom produces an inner satisfaction that is not purely rational, but also emotional. Yet this joy is subordinated to reason: it flows from a clear and just understanding of things, and not from mere superficial pleasures.

While encouraging certain emotions, Socrates firmly criticizes those that are contrary to reason and virtue, such as irrational anger, born of ignorance or falsely perceived injustice, for it often leads to destructive actions. Excessive desires, such as passions tied to wealth, power, or physical pleasures, are viewed as obstacles to virtue. Irrational fears, such as the fear of death, which according to him stem from ignorance; only rational examination can free us from this fear. Moreover, if Socrates' interlocutors find his rationality violent, he, on the contrary, sees the irrational as a source of violence, both toward others and toward oneself. For reason is even-tempered, whereas excessive passions profoundly disturb the soul. The recurring anger of his interlocutors is living proof of their suffering, even if Socrates does not dwell on its psychological dimension.

Thus, although Socrates privileges reason as the principal guide, he does not entirely deny emotions. On the contrary, he seems to believe that certain emotions can be channeled by reason to serve virtue. In this sense, he encourages emotions aligned with wisdom and justice, which inspire the individual to seek truth and to live a good life, which foster inner harmony and social peace. He is not an absolute adversary of emotions; rather, he considers them as forces that must be regulated and directed by reason. Regarding Socrates' treatment of emotions, it seems important to clarify the term *Eros* to which he refers. In traditional mythology, it is a god, but for Socrates the term designates a force or intermediary principle that animates human desires; it can mean desire, passion, or love. In *The Symposium*, as represented through the discourse of Diotima, a divinely inspired priestess whom Socrates presents as his source of wisdom on love, a clear distinction is made between two types of *Eros*: celestial, or divine *Eros*, and earthly, or human *Eros*. This dualism between celestial and earthly *Eros* is central to

understanding the Socratic conception of love and its role in the philosophical quest.

Earthly *Eros* is associated with physical desires, sensual pleasures, and attraction to bodily beauty. It is centered on tangible and immediate objects, such as the beauty of a body or the desire for personal satisfaction. This love is rather selfish, since it seeks to possess and to take pleasure from the other. Although not condemned in itself, it is considered a limited starting point that must be surpassed in order to reach higher aspirations. For example, the love for a partner based on physical beauty or charm belongs to earthly *Eros*. For Socrates, earthly *Eros* is not bad in itself, but it is insufficient to lead to a fully virtuous life or a deep understanding of truth.

Celestial *Eros*, by contrast, is a love oriented toward higher ideals such as beauty itself, truth, and wisdom. It is spiritual and philosophical. It transcends physical pleasures to focus on immaterial and universal realities. It is altruistic and aspirational: it pushes the individual to rise beyond immediate desires in order to seek perfection and unity with the divine. It is described as a force that guides the soul in its ascent toward the contemplation of “Beauty itself”. For example, love for knowledge, wisdom, or ideal beauty, which inspire virtuous actions and a harmonious life. In *The Symposium*, Diotima explains that celestial *Eros* allows the soul to climb a “ladder of love”: one begins by admiring the beauty of a particular individual, then rises progressively to the beauty of several bodies, then to the beauty of souls, of laws, and finally to absolute Beauty.

For Socrates, earthly *Eros* is not rejected, but rather viewed as an initial step in a spiritual journey. Physical desire can serve as a springboard to reach higher aspirations, if one follows the path of reason and philosophy. Thus the desire for the beauty of a body can lead to reflection on inner beauty, then on

universal beauty. But earthly *Eros* must be transformed by reason and philosophical discipline in order to become celestial *Eros*. Without this transformation, love remains superficial and ephemeral. This distinction reflects the Socratic vision of love as a motor for spiritual and intellectual growth. Earthly *Eros* represents natural human desires, which are necessary but limited. Celestial *Eros* symbolizes the aspiration to immortality, truth, and connection with the divine. It embodies the philosophical ideal where love becomes a quest for perfection and wisdom. By separating these two forms of love, Socrates underlines that true love is not limited to the satisfaction of material desires or to attachment to a particular individual. On the contrary, it must be a path toward contemplation of eternal and universal ideas. Earthly *Eros* serves as a starting point, while celestial *Eros* represents the ultimate goal of the philosophical quest. This distinction illustrates how Socrates and Plato integrate the human experience of love, of passion, into a broader vision of spiritual and intellectual life.

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates treats passionate love as a divine form of madness, far from being a weakness or a mere emotional overflow. It manifests through strong bodily signs: “trembling, shivering, tears”, which show that it is a powerful emotion, a “burning fire”, not reducible to a carnal desire or a need for immediate comfort. Unlike superficial emotions that simply seek to relieve us of a need or fill an immediate lack, what one could call “horizontal” emotions, tied to daily life, this amorous madness pushes the soul to rise, to reach toward an ideal, toward true beauty: a “vertical” emotion, an ascending power. This madness is not a negative disorder but a creative disturbance, which enriches the soul and transforms it. It stands in opposition to mere self-mastery or the cold rationality represented in this dialogue by the speech of Lysias, whom Socrates criticizes for his utilitarian and “reasonable” view of

love. Indeed, Lysias maintains that it is better to yield to a person who is not in love, since love is irrational, blind, and dangerous; he values instead self-control, prudence, emotional balance, and the concrete advantages of a passionless relationship. Socrates begins by imitating him, but then he corrects himself, claiming he has offended the gods by speaking thus. He then delivers a second speech, more exalted and profound, in which he rehabilitates amorous madness. He affirms that some forms of madness are not evil but divine, inspired by the gods. He distinguishes four forms of divine madness: prophetic madness, inspired by Apollo; ritual madness, inspired by Dionysus; poetic madness, inspired by the Muses; amorous madness, inspired by Eros and Aphrodite. It is on this last that Socrates lingers. He describes love as a reminiscence of absolute Beauty that the soul once contemplated in the intelligible world before its incarnation. This erotic madness is thus an upward movement of the soul, which tears it away from the material world and propels it toward the Good and the True.

Clearly, the point is not here to reject reason, but to broaden it in order to integrate this “divine madness”. Socrates criticizes discourses that are poorly constructed or poorly ordered, but he asserts that reason does not reach everything, and especially not what is divine, inspired, or sublime. Human reason is useful for organizing, controlling, or reflecting, but it remains in the domain of the measurable, the human, the ordinary. He distinguishes pathological, sterile madness from divine madness, which comes from the gods, not as a lack of reason but as an excess of truth or beauty, an overflow, a surge of the soul beyond its natural limits. Here, it would no doubt be necessary to distinguish emotions and feelings, which are rather passive, more fleeting, from passion, which animates us in a more sustained and constructive way. According to Socrates, passion provokes a disturbance, a loss of control,

but this disturbance is fruitful. It reveals a higher truth that reason alone cannot attain. He does not advocate a brutal opposition between reason and passion, but rather a dialectic: reason must accompany, order, and integrate this madness, without stifling it. In this sense, it educates passion by confronting it. But reason must learn to accompany excess, to understand it, to channel it, without reducing it. For Socrates, a truly philosophical reason does not merely calculate and dominate; it welcomes inspiration, bows before what surpasses it, and recognizes the divine part of the soul. It is not simply mastery, but also an opening to the infinite. There is thus an appeal to transcendence, and reason must place itself at the service of this ascending movement, without imagining itself all-powerful.

## DECEPTION

If we look at the so-called aporetic dialogues, such as the *Euthyphro*, the *Laches*, the *Charmides*, and so on, Socrates asks for a definition. He says he wants to know what piety, courage, or temperance is. But in the end, he offers nothing stable: he leaves the interlocutor at an impasse. One could think he simply fails, but one may also suppose that he had no real interest in the definition, since this failure is rather systematic. Two readings then oppose one another.

A realistic, “dogmatic” reading, in which Socrates truly seeks the definition: he believes there exists an essence of courage, justice, piety, but he does not reach it, either because he has not yet advanced far enough, or because his interlocutors cannot hold the thread. In this reading, the quest is sincere but unfinished. And a pedagogical, “ironic” reading, in which Socrates does not seek the definition as an end, but as a dialectical means. The demand for a

definition is a pedagogical lure: it forces the interlocutor to commit, to make explicit, to contradict himself. The real aim is to expose contradictions, provoke self-examination, and exercise critical thinking. The definition here is a pretext, not the goal.

Now, Socrates plays on both levels. He affirms the necessity of the definition, for without a clear essence we have only fluctuating opinions, yet in practice he never delivers them. This gap feeds his irony: he pretends to be in pursuit, but in fact he shows that the pursuit itself matters more than the result. One could thus accuse him of deceiving his interlocutors with a “false goal”, not exactly a lie, but a fraudulent aim. The promise of a definition is the hook that draws the interlocutor into the net of examination. Then Socrates tightens the mesh, until the other discovers his own ignorance.

Moreover, in later dialogues, Plato “resolved” this problem, for he began to provide “positive” definitions, especially with his doctrine of “Ideas”. Socrates, on the other hand, only asks questions, makes his interlocutors speak, dismantles their certainties, without ever producing a conclusive definition. One might even say he “makes it a point” never to reach a conclusion, so as to force us to conclude with him: “I know that I know nothing.” In the *Lysis*, he inquires into friendship; in the *Laches*, into courage; in the *Euthyphro*, into piety. And everywhere the pattern is the same: Socrates pushes his interlocutors to formulate a definition, then he critiques it, reverses it, destroys it, without offering a solution. What strikes us is that the dialogues remain open: they often end in aporia, that is, a logical dead end, an absence of conclusion. So why keep asking these questions, if no satisfactory answer is ever found? For him, the “secret”, the true method, is not to answer, but to

make one think. This is Socrates' genius: he does not want to give a truth, but to awaken thinking in the other and to exercise his own.
It is not knowledge in itself that interests him, but the life of the mind. It is less a technique of revelation than a technique of permanent destabilization, which explains his lack of "success" and immediate legacy. The important thing is not to find the truth, but never to stop seeking it. Thus one can say that the final definition is a "false aim". It is a promise, a direction, but not an arrival. That is what makes the dialogue alive and provocative. In fact, what Socrates proposes is a kind of philosophy of process, not of result. It is not the answer that counts, but the ceaseless movement of thinking toward it. Without saying it outright, he invites his interlocutor to doubt himself, to question his assumptions, to never rest upon an acquired certainty.

He does not claim to be wiser than his interlocutors. On the contrary, by affirming that he knows nothing, he places himself as a perpetual learner. And it is precisely this assumed ignorance that makes him free, mobile, always on the move. No doubt he knows himself that the true aim is not to define, but to keep the mind in motion, in tension, alive. One could say that more than a scientific inquiry, this is a spiritual practice. Thus, to claim that Socrates seeks to define is to grasp only the surface of his approach. To see consciously that he never reaches this goal is to grasp the core, for his true ambition is to keep us alert, in a state of questioning. One could call this an epistemology of lack, or also a negative dialectical method, in opposition, for example, to Hegel's constructive dialectic, which is always supposed to lead to a synthesis. Socrates demolishes false certainties without offering a positive system in replacement, a destructive, refutative process, without final synthesis, which often creates the illusion of aiming at definition.

## SOCRATES AND NIETZSCHE

To better understand the Socratic approach in its historical context, and its contrast with today's "popular" values, it is interesting to summon Friedrich Nietzsche's analysis, somewhat divergent. He contrasts the Greek values of combat, rooted in Antiquity, especially the culture of confrontation and the heroic figure, with the values inspired by Christianity, which he harshly criticizes. He admires the ancient Greeks for their cult of strength, beauty, and struggle. He sees in their philosophy and art a celebration of life, excellence, and self-affirmation. For example, athletic, artistic, or intellectual competition was seen as a way to surpass one's limits and reach excellence. These values are embodied by figures such as the Homeric heroes Achilles or Odysseus, the pre-Socratic philosophers, or the tragic poets, who fully embraced human reality, including suffering and death, without seeking to escape it. He violently criticizes Christianity, which he considers a "slave morality" that values pity, humility, submission, and renunciation of the earthly world. For him, these values weaken the individual by fostering guilt, fear, and the denial of life. Moreover, the Christian idea of "salvation" in the afterlife diverts attention from concrete realities and the will to power here and now. He criticizes Plato for the same reason: a philosophy of "other worlds", since he critiques the reality of appearances in favor of a "world of Ideas", which is a negation of life in its complexity and tragic dimension. Nietzsche calls for a transvaluation of values, a reversal of contemporary ideals. He invites us to replace Christian values with affirmative ones, centered on will to power, creation, and *amor fati* (the love of fate). The "overman" embodies this new ethic, capable of affirming his singularity, his own values, and of living

fully without submitting to external or transcendental ideals, and above all without subordination to the gaze of others. For him, Greek values represent an affirmation of existence, an active engagement in the world, and a struggle for excellence. In contrast, Christian values promote renunciation of the real, complacency in weakness, and escape toward illusory ideals. This opposition lies at the heart of his philosophy, which seeks to free humanity from its moral chains to create new values that celebrate strength, freedom, and individual flourishing.

Although he often criticizes Socrates in his writings, Nietzsche could nonetheless defend certain aspects of the Socratic method and of its combat values, particularly when opposed to contemporary thinking focused on "psychological support" and the valorization of emotions. For Nietzsche, Socrates still embodies a form of intellectual rigor, self-confrontation, and personal demand that sharply contrasts with what he saw as the weakness or complacency of modern thinking. He defends the superiority of reason and struggle over emotional comfort, criticizing the "morality of the weak", pity, consolation, sentimentality, or altruism of Christian inspiration, which for him signify decadence. He rejects the modern idea that emotions must constantly be soothed or that unconditional support must be provided to avoid psychological suffering. He sees this approach as encouraging ease and complacency toward the lower instincts of the human being.

In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche criticizes philosophies that privilege psychological comfort and pity, calling them "diseases of civilization". Socrates, by contrast, forces his interlocutors into direct confrontation with their ignorance and contradictions. This demanding approach aligns with the Nietzschean idea of self-overcoming and the fight against illusion. Nietzsche admires those who embrace struggle and discipline to attain higher ideals. He

could see in the Socratic method a form of intellectual combat that drives individuals to transcend their limits and face truth without compromise, even if Socrates' rationalism may also serve, at times, as a reassuring control, a flight from emotion, instinct, and the tragic. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche celebrates those who have the courage to "descend into the abyss" of their own soul to find truth there, even if painful. He criticizes any approach that seeks to calm tensions, conflicts, crises, or contradictions, rather than to confront them directly for personal growth. He advises us to "strike with the hammer on everything that is venerated, to see whether it rings true or hollow". He asserts: "there is no philosophy without *agon*" (*agon* meaning "combat" or "struggle" in ancient Greek). This idea is central in his thought and reflects his rejection of passive, consensual, or detached philosophies. Philosophy must not be a mere abstract search for truth or a disembodied intellectual exercise; it must be an active struggle, an existential combat that fully engages life, passions, and values.

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche denounces "sweetnesses of the soul" that avoid confronting the difficult realities of existence. Socrates, likewise, refuses all forms of intellectual complacency: he insists that his interlocutors face their errors and ignorance, matching Nietzsche's ideal of uncompromising truth. Nietzsche values those who accept truth, even if unpleasant, for it shows will to power and a desire to live fully. By imposing confrontation with contradictions, Socrates helps to free others from false beliefs that enslave them. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche admits that "truth is a danger", but necessary for those who truly want to live, not merely survive. He might see in Socrates an example of intellectual discipline, a quality he admires in those who refuse mental laziness or sentimentality. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, he criticizes philosophies that

overvalue compassion and weakness, preferring those that demand constant effort at self-overcoming.

The Socratic method, with its insistence on permanent questioning, corresponds to this idea of transcendence. Indeed, it is too “laborious” for Nietzsche said, who prefers the vigor of bold affirmation or the force of the tragic But it does not offer easy comfort, but invites arduous intellectual work to reach clarity and virtue. Nevertheless, Socrates would oppose Nietzsche, for he does not value self-affirmation or the creation of individual values. He always subordinates the individual to a universal and objective truth that transcends him. Like mystics, he embodies rather the principle of “emptying oneself” so that truth may pass through us. He preaches humility before a transcendent truth.

For Nietzsche, modern society is marked by decadence: the search for comfort, fear of suffering, and over-valorization of emotions. The Socratic method, with its intellectual rigor and moral demand, represents an alternative to this decadence. In *Ecce Homo*, he criticizes modern philosophies that privilege “compassion” and “kindness”, seeing them as signs of weakness. Though Nietzsche may defend aspects of the Socratic method, he also criticizes Socrates for introducing a form of excessive rationalism that devalues human instincts and passions. “Socrates corrupts tragic thinking with his tyrannical reason”, he writes in *Twilight of the Idols*. Yet he could still recognize that Socrates stands above modern approaches of psychological support, because Socrates values truth and virtue over emotional comfort, because his method demands an active fight against ignorance and illusion, unlike the passivity fostered by some forms of support.

What Nietzsche would admire in Socrates is his refusal to yield to illusions, easy emotions, or soothing answers. Unlike contemporary thinking centered on psychological comfort, Socrates embodies a demanding and courageous approach to truth, aligned with the Nietzschean ideal of will to power and self-overcoming. Ultimately, Nietzsche would probably see in Socrates an ally against modern decadence, while remaining cautious of the dangers of an overly absolute rationalism.

# CONCLUSION: THE SOCRATIC LEGACY

## THE ABANDONMENT OF MAIEUTICS

Socrates did not found a school in the institutional or dogmatic sense, and the systematic practice of *maieutics* was quickly marginalized, even criticized, for several reasons of various kinds, philosophical, political, pedagogical, and psychological.

First, there was his refusal or absence of doctrine, for Socrates did not transmit positive knowledge, a structured teaching, an established method, or a truth to be memorized. Moreover, he wrote nothing, since for him such a fixed and rigid activity stood in opposition to the living practice of dialogue. As he says in *Phaedrus*: “Writing, Phaedrus, will cause those who learn it to forget: they will cease to exercise their memory, because they will trust what is written... You give your disciples the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom..” Socrates valued oral dialogue instead, interactive, adaptable to each interlocutor, and above all enabling a deeper appropriation of ideas. Writing, in his view, is rigid,

incapable of adapting or responding to objections. It transmits mere “shadows” of thinking, not thinking itself, which for him was a living commitment.

Thus, no program, no precise rules, and therefore no institutional continuity. Without written formalization, his practice is difficult to transmit faithfully, except through the accounts left by others. From these testimonies, we see that he contented himself with destabilizing, questioning, dismantling certainties. This refusal to deliver definitive content made his practice incompatible with academic or scholastic transmission, which presupposes dogmas, theses, texts to be learned. The method is uncomfortable, even unbearable, because *maieutics* operates in a state of permanent “crisis”: it confronts the interlocutor with his own ignorance, prejudices, contradictions, incoherence. Few people can endure such tension for long, which humiliates the individual and shakes his identity. This form of intellectual violence repels broad adherence. On the social and political level, such a practice was seen as a public danger: by destroying illusions, it undermined the symbolic foundations of authority, religion, and social order. Socrates’ death sentence is a sign of this intolerance toward a radically deconstructive thinking, and this political rejection later had a dissuasive effect. Unlike Plato, Aristotle, or Epicurus, Socrates created no framework of teaching, no school, no hierarchy or corpus. He remained nomadic, ironic, elusive. This posture, admirable in theory, made it difficult to reproduce his method on a large scale, since it lacked stable pedagogical structure. Unlike a formal lecture, *maieutics* rests on face-to-face dialogue, generally improvised. It requires a motivated, present, and engaged interlocutor, a master able to ask the right questions, great patience, and a climate of trust, even if some failed dialogues are just as revealing. Such a method, however, is hardly transferable on a wide scale. It does not lend itself to direct or indirect institutional transmission.

Some “heirs”, the Cynics, the Megarians, even the “faithful” Plato, each diverted the Socratic posture toward their own logic: provocative morality, abstract logic, or metaphysical system. The “pure” *maieutics* was absorbed, recovered, or betrayed, though traces of it can still be found, diluted or transformed. Most later philosophies sought answers, systems, ontological or ethical assurances, while keeping only a meager portion of questioning, in an accessory role. After Socrates, philosophy tended toward doctrinal construction, which contradicted the non-directive and interrogative spirit of *maieutics*. The method was also harshly criticized for its imprecision, inefficiency, and pedagogical limits.

The Socratic posture, founded on active doubt and fertile ignorance, runs counter to the human need for conceptual security. It is incompatible with the natural desire for mastery and certainty. Socratic practice presupposes the ability to tolerate cognitive dissonance, to lose one’s footing without disintegrating, even to find a certain pleasure in it. Few human beings are capable of this, or even willing. The comfort of illusion or stable opinion is often preferred to the goad of truth, a form of psychological resistance to lucidity. Some philosophers and educators reproached maieutics for being manipulative, asking leading questions to push the other into thinking like oneself, a charge stemming from misunderstanding or deviant practice. The principle of assuming that all truth already lies within the individual, the Platonic thesis of reminiscence, was judged naïve, in opposition to a transmissive vision of education closer to Aristotle’s *tabula rasa*, in which the mind must be “filled” with knowledge. Certainly, some pedagogical or psychological practices, such as various cognitive therapies, have rediscovered certain virtues of questioning and dialogue, but they are far from the radicality of the Socratic dialogue and its rigorous reliance on reason.

Thus, Socrates did not “found a school”, not because he failed, but because he is intransmissible without a certain betrayal or dilution. His practice is a living ethic, a tension, a confrontation, a vertigo. It resists institutionalization. That is why it was abandoned, except by a few rare individuals here and there.

## THE ABANDONMENT OF DIALECTIC

Certainly, Plato makes use of dialectic, but the Socratic dialectic and Platonic dialectic differ in intentions, methods, and goals, even though they are closely linked. For Socrates, dialectic is an interrogative method without doctrine. He never proposes a theory or a philosophical system. His aim is not to assert a truth but to uncover errors, contradictions, and poorly founded opinions. He helps his interlocutor give birth to his own thought by asking questions. To achieve this, he must lead him to doubt his certainties, to recognize his ignorance, which is the necessary condition for seeking the truth. For Socrates, dialectic is a critical tool, not a means of access to a positive truth. What matters is dialogue, problematization, and the recognition of uncertainty. Plato, on the other hand, assigns a metaphysical purpose to dialectic: he elaborates a doctrine, the Ideas, the Forms, eternal and suprasensible realities. Yet, the Socratic dialectic becomes the privileged method for reaching these intelligible realities: first, by transcending opinion (doxa) to attain true knowledge (epistēmē); then, by ascending from sensory appearances toward rational essences. For Plato, dialectic stands at the summit of the ladder of knowledge, because it enables the soul to purify itself, to detach from the sensible world, and to contemplate the Ideas: the Good, the Beautiful, the Just, and so on. For him, dialectic is metaphysical and ascensional: it leads to God, to Truth, to Being itself. It is a rational and pedagogical exercise that leads to a

vision of ultimate realities, and for that reason remains fundamental. The Socratic approach seems to lack an end in the doctrinal sense, for it does not build a system. But this “emptiness” is also what makes it so powerful: it frees the mind from illusions, opens the way for inquiry, without imposing a final answer. Plato, in contrast, gives direction to this quest: he fixes a destination, the Ideas, and transforms dialectic into a true philosophical and spiritual tool with a determined purpose. Another difference lies in the concept of metaphysical contemplation. Socrates does not explicitly develop access to the Forms in themselves, as we find in Plato; for him, this quest for essence remains only a regulative ideal. It is important, therefore, to distinguish between what Socrates actually says in Plato’s dialogues and what Plato attributes to him in order to build his own philosophy. For Plato will ultimately develop the theory of Ideas, as well as the notion of intellectual contemplation as the ultimate goal of philosophy.

Socrates seeks universal and stable definitions of key concepts, particularly moral ones, temperance, friendship, courage, but not necessarily a reality separate from the sensible. He never provides positive or dogmatic answers; his aim is above all to purify thinking and to seek virtue in order to apply it in practical life. Plato, meanwhile, theorizes, for the Ideas are intelligible, eternal, immutable realities, existing outside the sensible world, accessible not by the senses but by the intellect. In *The Republic*, dialectic stands at the summit of the ladder of knowledge: it becomes contemplative, enabling one to leave the sensible world to reach the world of Ideas, above all the Idea of the Good, the source of all truth. The philosopher must turn his soul toward the intelligible; the contemplation of the Ideas is a moral, intellectual, and even spiritual ideal. There is some confusion here, for Plato’s early dialogues, more “Socratic”, likely reflect what Socrates really said, while the middle dialogues express Platonic

thought, though still in Socrates' voice. It is Plato, not Socrates, who introduces the Ideas as separate realities, and contemplation as the philosophical goal, a metaphysical vision somewhat absent in Socrates. But without Socrates, with his moral rigor, love of dialogue, and tireless quest for truth, Plato could never have built his metaphysical system.

In Aristotle, contemplation is the highest and most complete activity of the human being. It no longer depends on dialectical dialogue, as in Plato, but on an intellectual intuition of reality, based on reason and the study of causes. It consists in grasping ultimate realities, in particular first principles and causes, including God, the "Unmoved Mover". It is the supreme activity of the accomplished human being. It is autonomous, free, without external goal: an activity in itself, with no other end than itself, and for that reason the most divine. This contemplative life is superior to practical or political life; it allows man to reach his true happiness. It applies both to nature and to the divine: to contemplate is to understand the movements of the heavens, the structure of living beings, final causes, and so on. But it also means rising to the understanding of the Prime Mover, first cause of all motion. ""If thought is the most divine thing in man, then the contemplative life is the most divine thing in human life.", he writes in *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Contemplation is therefore the greatest and most lasting happiness, for it is the highest perfection of our noblest faculty. Aristotle rejects dialectic as a path toward contemplation, because dialectic starts from opinions, whereas Aristotle wishes to begin from things themselves, observable, analyzable, thus inaugurating the scientific model. Dialectic remains at the level of the possible and the probable, whereas Aristotle aims at necessary truth through demonstration. Dialectic is a critical tool, useful for training the mind, but not conclusive, insufficient for genuine knowledge. Aristotelian contemplation is autonomous, individual: it does not

depend on formal dialogue, nor on an ascensional dialectical method as in Plato. It consists in identifying first causes, the categories of being, objects of pure thinking, not in seeking some ultimate principle, the ineffable Good, beyond even the Ideas, as in Plato. Thus, the aim of philosophy is not the liberation of the soul, its purification, and return to the intelligible, as in Plato, but the realization of true knowledge of the world and of oneself. And the end of life is to attain *eudaimonia*, happiness, through theory. It is not a matter of leaving the sensible world to reach an ideal one, but of understanding this world in its intelligible structure, even to the point of touching the divine within immanence.

Dialectic, central in Socratic philosophy, also holds an important place in Plato's Academy. It consists in exploring ideas by confronting opposing theses, through dialogue and refutation. For Plato, dialectic is the summit of knowledge; it enables access to eternal truths, especially the Ideas. Aristotle, Plato's disciple but quickly his critic, takes a more negative stance. For him, dialectic is not false or entirely useless, but it has a major flaw: it begins from commonly accepted opinions (*endoxa*), without necessarily aiming to establish necessary, demonstrable truths. Aristotle criticizes dialectic as practiced by Socrates' followers and especially as developed in Plato's Academy, for its lack of real foundation and its overly formal or disputatious nature. He does not reject it entirely, but he assigns it a subordinate role. It is a pedagogical and critical tool, useful for discussing opinions, but incapable on its own of establishing a solid scientific or philosophical truth. For him, dialectic has a place in intellectual training, but it must yield to a rigorous approach founded on the analysis of causes and logical demonstration, the establishment of certainties, what he develops in his logical and scientific works.

Dialectic remains at the level of probability and mere opinion, rather than aiming at science (*epistēmē*) or a rational grasp of causes. It remains at the level of debate rather than science. For Aristotle, to philosophize is to seek cause, essence, necessary truth, something dialectic, focused on argument for and against, cannot provide. It does not establish a stable positive position. Dialectic argues from opposing positions without necessarily reaching a firm or true conclusion. It risks casting doubt on everything, including fundamental principles. This potential relativism runs counter to the Aristotelian conviction that there are first principles, undemonstrable but necessary, that ground all science. Thus he reproaches dialectic for not resting on certain principles, for relying instead on widely shared beliefs, privileging the form of reasoning over the real grounding of concepts, fostering controversy rather than systematic, scientific inquiry into truth.

In short, for Aristotle, dialectic is a useful tool to exercise the mind, challenge prejudices, and begin reflection, but it is not sufficient to establish true knowledge. That is why he assigns it a subordinate role in his philosophical system: dialectic is preparatory, never conclusive. It cannot constitute the substance of philosophical work. And since Aristotle shaped the fundamental matrix of what would become Western philosophy, his anti-dialectical stance endured, relegating the Socratic heritage to a secondary, even superfluous status. This also explains the tendency toward monologue that characterizes academic philosophy: a dogmatic and thesis-driven vision of intellectual work, a certain intellectual narcissism that promotes eristic rather than dialectic, as Plato himself denounced.

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATION

But there is also a more psychological explanation for the gradual abandonment of the Socratic practice, one that lies in its very nature: it involves an intellectual and existential wrestling match that many find unsettling, even violent. “For one must approach discourse with the soul, as a wrestler with his body”, he says in the *Gorgias*. Unlike the passive transmission of knowledge, where a teacher hands down truths to docile listeners, the Socratic dialogue is an ordeal. It does not address the student as a mere receiver, but as an adversary to be awakened, shaken, dislodged from his certainties. Nor is it an academic debate, where each politely lays out his theses without truly engaging. It is an intellectual exposure, where one risks being put on the spot, even humiliated, if one clings to inconsistent or rigid opinions. This face-to-face spares neither ego nor emotion: it stirs, it unsettles, it forces one to think rather than simply repeat.

That is why Socratic practice frightens or irritates: it requires courage, not only to confront ideas but to confront oneself. Socrates does not caress opinion, he strips it bare. He does not seek to persuade, but to unveil. In doing so, he imposes himself as an intrusive presence in the other’s mind, forcing consciousness to face itself. The incessant questioning, the exposure of contradictions, the biting irony: all this produces a tension not without violence. It is not the comfort of knowledge, but the discomfort of examination. In a world that prizes apparent kindness, smooth exchanges, and conflict-avoidance, such direct interpellation is often perceived as aggressive. It demands of the respondent that he expose himself, that he commit, that he lay bare not only his ideas but the coherence of his being. And this, many do not want. They want to be understood, not confronted; listened to, not tested.

Socratic practice, by refusing the illusion of tranquil knowledge, breaks with the dominant school model and with the psychology of self-esteem at any cost. It assumes that true learning passes through destabilization. But such truth is wounding. That is why, so often, gentle words are preferred to sharp truth, and the awakening of thinking is sacrificed to the peace of relations.

This “wrestling match” with oneself and with the other, this fertile yet harsh friction, constitutes the very soul of philosophical questioning. To reject it may also be to refuse to enter fully into the adventure of thinking. Yet one can understand why many find this approach too uncomfortable or violent, as we have already explained at length. Socratic practice is not suited to everyone, as Plato already shows in his dialogues. Though in theory it is accessible to anyone capable of reflection, it rests on certain moral, intellectual, and psychological conditions that are not always present or developed.

Let us identify some of the most common obstacles:

- It is not for the anxious, the impatient, those who seek quick answers or certainties. It frustrates those who hope for an immediate solution to a moral or existential problem.

- It is not for those who want to defend their opinions at all costs. The Socratic dialogue requires a critical openness to oneself. If someone clings to his ideas without wishing to discuss or clarify them, the dialogue becomes impossible or sterile. “Good faith” is essential: the sincere will to seek truth or the good, not merely to shine, to play, to manipulate, or to provoke.

- It is not for those who confuse debate with common inquiry. It is not about winning or persuading, but about deepening a question together,

since Socratic philosophy is cooperative, not competitive. It therefore requires one to speak concisely, to answer simply to the questions posed, without evasion, without explaining everything, nuancing everything, justifying everything. It is not a rhetorical exercise, not a fascination with discourse, but an ascetic practice, a discipline of reason, without excluding its creative dimension.

- It is not for those who refuse intellectual vulnerability. Accepting such an exercise implies placing oneself in a position of "weakness": acknowledging that one does not know, that one may be mistaken, that one perhaps carries prejudices. Such an attitude is easily perceived as a narcissistic threat. For in general, it is difficult to accept uncertainty or personal questioning.

- It is not for those who lack emotional or moral maturity. Socratic practice demands a certain psychological grounding in order to sustain coherent discourse, to listen patiently, to endure criticism, to bear the frustration of not reaching immediate conclusions, and above all, not to identify with one's ideas. Excessive sensitivity or lack of distance inhibits rationality.

- It is not for those who dislike thinking rigorously without an immediate practical end. It demands great intellectual patience: to journey at length through uncertainty without the guarantee of arriving at final answers. One must find intrinsic satisfaction in the very act of dialogue, rather than in the accumulation of usable knowledge or practical solutions. It is a discipline that values the practice of reason without concern for immediate application in daily life.

Socratic practice is not an “all-powerful” method or an infallible algorithm. It is only an exercise that demands a particular inner disposition: humility, curiosity, intellectual honesty, patience. Those who lack these qualities, or do not wish to cultivate them, are unlikely to gain much from it; they may see it as a waste of time, or even a source of irritation. But for those who engage freely and authentically, it is a profoundly liberating, joyful, and enriching experience: that of thinking freely, by oneself and in the company of others.

## THE SOCRATIC “MESSAGE”

Although Socrates himself wrote nothing and never formalized his teaching, we can nonetheless grasp the meaning of his work through the writings of Plato and Xenophon. Let us now try to summarize the key elements of his message.

Socrates’ first principle, expressed in his famous saying “The unexamined life is not worth living”, affirms that wisdom begins with self-examination. In his view, most people live in illusion, bound to beliefs they have never questioned. Philosophy is the awakening of consciousness, the act of thinking for oneself by challenging what one believes to know, so as to live a truly human and free life. He conceives philosophy as rational discourse inseparable from a way of life, an existence grounded in constant introspection. This ongoing examination of oneself means not living blindly, not following opinions without questioning them, and striving to understand not only the world but also oneself, two dimensions that, for him, are inseparable. This is the essence of the Delphic injunction he adopts as his own: “Know thyself, and thou shalt know the universe and the gods.” Far from narcissism, this injunction opens onto reason through its intellectual and existential rigor.

For Socrates, the search for meaning is paramount, the constant effort to clarify thinking. He always asks: “What do you mean by…?” “What do you mean when you say this is just, good, or courageous?” To know what one is truly saying is, for him, a major philosophical act: not only speaking, but knowing what one says. True wisdom begins with the recognition of ignorance, knowing what one knows and what one does not. Acknowledged ignorance is preferable to false knowledge. Unlike those who claim to know without foundation, Socrates stands out for his intellectual humility. To say “I know that I know nothing” is to open the way to genuine knowledge, based on sincere questioning rather than illusory certainties. If one already “knows”, there is no reason to inquire or criticize. Unlike the sophists who claimed to know everything, he shows through questioning that our certainties are often illusions. Thus truth must be sought through dialogue and inquiry, through dialectical confrontation of minds, not through competition or rhetorical combat. His method was to deconstruct his interlocutors’ certainties so as to reveal their contradictions. The goal was not to win debates but to work together toward a clearer understanding by stripping away illusions of knowledge.

He did not “teach” in the dogmatic sense, he did not transmit ready-made truths, but he nonetheless gave a lesson through his very stance. By asking questions, by feigning ignorance, by leading the interlocutor to recognize his contradictions, he embodied a form of teaching by example: that of rigorous, demanding, and constantly evolving thinking. Socrates taught less by what he said than by what he made others think, and above all by what he was: a seeker, lucid about his limits, more attached to truth than to victory. We must distinguish between the refusal of dogmatic lecturing and the exemplarity of his method, which is profoundly formative. His use of *maieutics*, because it

actively engages thinking, fosters intellectual autonomy and leads to deeper appropriation of ideas, unlike mere transmission. What one discovers for oneself transforms more deeply than what one passively receives. Truth emerges in dialogue, among free and authentic minds, through the clash of ideas, revealed contradictions, and the shared quest for clarity.

One may nonetheless speak of a “Socratic doctrine”, certain principles at the heart of his approach, for example, “It is better to suffer injustice than to commit it”, or “It is better to do wrong knowingly than unknowingly.” Socrates defends a moral intellectualism: virtue is a matter of knowledge and reflection. To live virtuously is not to obey external moral rules or conventions, but to understand for oneself what the good truly is. It is an invitation to ethical reflection: one cannot live “well” without examining and grasping what goodness entails. Virtue thus requires knowledge, not mere obedience. To become wise is to become virtuous. He argues that no one does evil willingly: if one acts badly, it is because one ignores the true good. Wickedness is not a lucid choice but an error in judgment. To know the good is necessarily to do it. Hence wisdom, and thus philosophy, is the key to virtue: to deeply understand justice, goodness, or courage is to embody them. Morality becomes an act of lucidity, not of formal constraint or external censorship. True wealth is inner: the soul is worth more than external goods. Wealth, power, or glory mean nothing if one loses integrity. More than the body or possessions, it is the soul that must be cultivated, through moral examination, justice, and refusal of self-deception. Justice, clarity, and care for the good are more precious than social success. Better to be just and poor than corrupt and powerful, for a degraded soul makes life unworthy of living. He teaches that it is better to die just than to live compromised. Facing unjust authority, he refuses to betray his conscience or abandon philosophy: fidelity to justice must prevail over survival. Moral

integrity is absolute, and to commit injustice is worse than to suffer it. His death thus becomes the ultimate testimony of ethical coherence.

Socrates urges each of us to play a critical and provocative role, even if it disturbs. Like the gadfly that stings the drowsy horse, one must jolt society from moral and intellectual lethargy. A just community cannot exist without dissenting voices that challenge certainties and collective illusions. It is a call to civic courage and philosophical responsibility, for a healthy society needs critics who shatter comfortable illusions, beginning with ourselves.

Socrates was not only a thinker, but a way of thinking, a rigorous stance toward existence. He does not offer a fixed doctrine but a method, a philosophical attitude: perpetual questioning, intellectual humility, and the conviction that to philosophize is to learn to live. His “doctrine”, if we can call it that, is precisely never to stop seeking, doubting, and examining. His mission was not to provide answers but to create seekers of truth, inquiring minds among his fellow citizens. For Socrates, philosophy is not a mere intellectual discipline: it is a path to a better life. His death, drinking the hemlock after being condemned for “corrupting the youth”, consecrated him as the first martyr of philosophy: a man who chose questioning over obedience, truth over life. By his trial and “self-chosen” death, Socrates affirmed a radical inner freedom. He yielded neither to fear of death nor to political pressure. He lived to the end according to his principles, insisting that justice cannot be subordinated to survival or self-interest.

Thus Socrates leaves no fixed doctrine, but he does bequeath us an ethical and intellectual demand: to live as free, lucid, coherent beings, at the service of the good, wary of the illusion of knowledge. His message is less a content than a

way of life: to think for oneself, with others, in pursuit of justice. That alone makes him the founder of Western philosophy.

Socratic practice is remarkably effective precisely because it does not seek to convince but to make one think. Instead of imposing truth, it helps each person discover for himself the flaws in his reasoning and the fragility of his certainties. By asking simple yet rigorous questions, Socrates unsettles superficial opinions, revealing what is incoherent, confused, or unexamined. This method makes thinking clearer, more demanding, more autonomous. It teaches us not to flee doubt, but to use it as a lever of lucidity. In this sense, it transforms not only ideas but the individual himself, by forcing him to become aware of himself, responsible for his words, his values, and his choices. It is a genuine education in inner freedom. And it is perhaps for this very reason that it can so easily be experienced as violent.

# ANNEXES: CONTEMPORARY OBJECTIONS

Several contemporary intellectual and psychological frameworks can be opposed to the principle of the Socratic questioning, both in its method and in its posture. Let us examine some important angles of criticism.

## PSYCHOANALYSIS

Although psychoanalysis and the Socratic framework share a common concern for self-knowledge and the exploration of internal contradictions, they differ profoundly in their methods, objectives, and their conceptions of truth and

healing. Socrates seeks to enlighten the mind through reason and to reach universal truths. Freud plunges into the depths of the unconscious to heal individual psychological suffering. Thus, although certain elements of the Socratic method may be perceived as distant precursors of psychoanalysis, the latter belongs more to a modern and "scientific" tradition that departs from Socrates' rational and universal ideals.

Psychoanalysis, developed by Freud and his successors, implicitly or explicitly criticizes the Socratic approach on several points. These criticisms stem from fundamental differences between the two approaches: where Socrates emphasizes reason and self-mastery, psychoanalysis explores the emotional, unconscious, and often irrational dimensions of the human being. Here are the main criticisms psychoanalysis could formulate against the Socratic method.

For Socrates, truth and virtue are accessible through rational reflection. He assumes that conscious ignorance is the main obstacle to self-knowledge and to a virtuous life. Psychoanalysis rejects this simplistic view, emphasizing that internal conflicts are not always conscious or rational. Repressed desires, childhood traumas, and instinctual drives escape consciousness and profoundly shape our behavior. Freud explains that neuroses such as anxiety or phobias result from unconscious desires or conflicts, not from a mere lack of rational knowledge.

Psychoanalysis holds that some truths cannot be reached by conscious reflection or logical reasoning alone. A psychoanalytic patient discovers unconscious truths through dreams, slips of the tongue, or free associations, without passing through explicit reasoning. Socrates values reason as the supreme guide of human life. He considers that emotions must be disciplined by reason to achieve virtue. Psychoanalysis, on the contrary, sees emotions and

instincts as central to psychic life. Ignoring these dimensions leads to an incomplete vision of the human being. Freud introduced the concept of the *id*, representing instinctual drives and repressed desires. These irrational forces often influence our actions, even if we are not consciously aware of them.

Socratic approach assumes that internal conflicts can be resolved by rational clarity. Psychoanalysis, however, shows that denying or repressing emotions and desires can lead to psychological disorders. Socrates seeks universal truths about virtue, justice, and the human condition. He believes that these truths are accessible to everyone through reason. Psychoanalysis rejects the idea of a universal truth applicable to all. Each individual is unique, shaped by emotional experiences, early relationships, and unconscious conflicts.

The Socratic approach assumes that internal contradictions can be resolved through clear rational understanding. Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, recognizes that human conflicts are often ambivalent and difficult to resolve completely. For example, a patient may feel both love and hatred toward a parental figure, reflecting the complexity of human relationships.

Socrates plays an active role in dialogue, asking precise questions and guiding his interlocutors toward discovering the truth. This approach can seem intrusive or directive. The psychoanalyst adopts a posture of benevolent neutrality, avoiding explicit guidance of the patient. The emphasis is placed on free association and the interpretation of unconscious motives.

The Socratic approach can be perceived as a form of psychological manipulation, in which Socrates imposes his own vision of truth on his interlocutors. Psychoanalysis criticizes this approach by insisting on the importance of letting the patient find their own truths. A psychoanalyst does

not seek to impose solutions but to help the patient understand their own internal conflicts.

In conclusion, psychoanalysis criticizes the Socratic approach for its rational universalism, its ignorance of the unconscious and its underestimation of emotions and instincts. Where Socrates sees reason as the only path to truth and virtue, psychoanalysis highlights the irrational, subjective, and unconscious dimensions of the human being. These criticisms emphasize that the Socratic method, though admirable in its aim of rational clarification, remains limited in the face of the complexity of the psychological and emotional conflicts that characterize the human condition. The two approaches are therefore fundamentally opposed in their conception of truth, method, and objective: where Socrates seeks to enlighten the mind through reason, psychoanalysis plunges into the depths of the soul to release hidden tensions.

Psychoanalysis, as a discipline exploring the depths of the unconscious and the irrational dimensions of the human psyche, would formulate several important criticisms of Socratic reason. These criticisms rest on the fact that psychoanalysis considers reason to be only a partial and sometimes deceptive facet of the human mind, incapable of accounting for the full range of forces that shape our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, and providing only an illusion of autonomy.

For Socrates, reason is the supreme principle that guides the human being toward truth, virtue, and wisdom. He believes that rational ignorance is at the root of all moral evils, and that conscious reflection can resolve these problems. Psychoanalysis criticizes this view by pointing out that reason is often only a façade or a rationalization of unconscious desires. Freud shows that our actions are often driven by instinctual drives, repressed desires, or

buried traumas, long before our reason attempts to justify them. An individual may rationalize self-destructive choices with logical explanations, while in reality those choices are dictated by unconscious conflicts.

Psychoanalysis sees reason as offering an illusion of control over oneself and the world. In reality, unconscious forces exert constant influence, often without our awareness. Freud explains that neuroses such as anxiety or compulsions result from unacceptable desires that have been repressed into the unconscious, not from a lack of rational reflection. Psychoanalysis criticizes this rationalist approach by affirming that reason can itself serve as a defense mechanism to avoid confronting unconscious truths. For example, rationalization allows individuals to justify irrational behaviors without having to face the deeper sources of their suffering. Freud introduced the concept of repression to explain how reason and consciousness can censor uncomfortable truths. Socratic reason, by insisting on clarity and logical coherence, risks reinforcing this repression instead of dissipating it.

Psychoanalysis also emphasizes that reason can be used as a tool of domination or social normalization. Rational norms imposed by society, through the superego, may compel individuals to repress their authentic desires, thereby generating internal conflicts. Thus, the Socratic approach, even if well-intentioned, may be perceived as a form of psychological manipulation in which reason is used to impose a particular truth. Psychoanalysis criticizes this approach by stressing the importance of respecting the subjective and unconscious truths of each individual.

Socrates values self-mastery and considers that emotions must be disciplined by reason to achieve virtue. He often associates strong emotions such as anger or fear with ignorance or weakness. Thus Socrates remains calm and rational

even when confronted with criticism or difficult situations. Psychoanalysis criticizes this vision, insisting that emotions should not be repressed or dominated by reason but rather integrated and understood. Ignoring or disciplining emotions can lead to psychological disorders. Psychoanalysis recognizes that human emotions are often ambivalent and complex, and therefore cannot be simplified.

Psychoanalysis thus criticizes Socratic reason for its simplistic universalism, its ignorance of unconscious dimensions, and its potential role as a defense mechanism or instrument of domination. Where Socrates sees reason as an absolute guide toward truth and virtue, psychoanalysis brings to light the limits of this approach by insisting on the importance of emotions, instincts, and unconscious conflicts. It invites us to go beyond Socratic reason to explore the deeper and often irrational dimensions of the human being.

## POSTMODERN RELATIVISM

Postmodern relativism, which emerged mainly in the second half of the 20th century with thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Richard Rorty, rejects the notions of universal truth, absolute objectivity, and transcendent rational reasoning. Within this framework, the Socratic method, centered on the search for universal truths through rational dialogue, can be criticized from several angles.

Postmodern relativism rejects the idea of universal truths. From this perspective, “truths” are always contextual, historical, and cultural, shaped by power relations, social traditions, and specific languages. For instance, Michel Foucault shows that concepts of truth and knowledge are intrinsically tied to

the power structures of a given society. What Socrates takes to be “universal truth” may simply reflect the norms of his own time. Postmodern relativism insists on the plurality of perspectives and rejects any attempt to impose a single interpretation as valid for all. For example, Jacques Derrida critiques the idea of a fixed truth by introducing the concept of deconstruction, which demonstrates that meanings are always unstable and dependent on context, something that can be described as nominalism.

Socrates seeks universal essences in his dialogues. He does not merely listen to opinions; he wants to move beyond particular cases to discover what courage, justice, or piety are *in themselves*, and to define them, even if the definition fails. This essentialism functions as a regulative ideal. But nominalism rejects the existence of such essences, since there is no “essence of courage”. There are only concrete cases that we happen to call “courage”. To search for “justice in itself” is a metaphysical illusion. Any attempt at universal definition is either arbitrary, circular, or in fact contextual. From this viewpoint, Socratic questions are wrongly posed: they assume, falsely, that something real lies behind the word.

If one adopts a nominalist perspective, the Socratic method becomes a language game that runs empty: there is nothing behind the words except their usage, their “language games”, as Wittgenstein wrote. The Socratic dialogue can then be seen as a form of rhetorical manipulation, which makes one believe that truth has been reached, when in reality it merely imposes a certain arbitrary formal coherence. Moreover, postmodern relativism criticizes the Socratic universalist vision by affirming that reason itself is a social and historical construction. What Socrates considers “reasonable” is in fact the product of cultural conventions specific to his time. Richard Rorty, for example,

argues that rational systems of thinking are not windows onto objective truth, but pragmatic tools developed in particular contexts. Thinkers such as Foucault point out that reason is often an instrument of domination used to impose social norms or to exclude alternative perspectives. The Socratic method, though apparently neutral, could thus be perceived as a way of privileging certain forms of knowledge, rational or logical, at the expense of others, such as emotional or intuitive knowledge.

Socrates assumes that it is possible to reach a neutral and objective standpoint from which to judge ideas and actions. He uses dialectic to clarify concepts and eliminate contradictions. Postmodern relativism rejects this claim to objectivity. From this perspective, all knowledge is situated, that is, influenced by the social, cultural, and historical context of the one who produces it. The Socratic method, though seemingly collaborative, can be criticized as a subtle exercise of power in which Socrates implicitly imposes his own presuppositions while feigning ignorance. Derrida, for example, would critique Socratic maieutics as a form of metaphysics of the subject, where Socrates tacitly controls the process to reach his own conclusions.

The Socratic method relies on rational dialogue between individuals presumed equal in their capacity for reflection. Socrates engages his interlocutors in discussion to reveal their ignorance and guide them toward truth. Postmodern relativism critiques this by pointing out that it excludes the perspectives of those who do not share the same linguistic, intellectual, or social codes. The method privileges voices already integrated into structures of power. Postmodern feminist thinkers, such as Judith Butler, would criticize Socrates for privileging masculine, rational, and dominant forms of discourse over the experiences and knowledge of women or marginalized groups. Postmodern

relativism values alternative forms of knowledge, such as personal narratives, embodied experiences, or cultural practices, which cannot be captured by a strictly rational method. For instance, Lyotard criticizes the “grand narrative” of modernity, which claims to explain the world through universal systems, in favor of local and diverse “little narratives”.

In conclusion, postmodern relativism critiques the Socratic method for its universalism, its ideal of transcendent rationality, its claim to objectivity and its exclusion of marginal voices. Where Socrates seeks universal truths accessible through reason, postmodern relativism insists on the plurality of perspectives, the historical and cultural situatedness of knowledge, and the importance of recognizing alternative forms of understanding. These criticisms show that the Socratic method, admirable though it may be in its ambition for rational clarity, is limited by its inability to account for the diversity of human experiences and the complexity of power relations in the production of knowledge. Postmodern relativism therefore calls for moving beyond the Socratic method, adopting more inclusive and contextual approaches. This current holds that all opinions are equally valid and that no objective or universal truth exists to be attained. The Socratic method, by contrast, presupposes that there is some form of truth, or at least internal coherence, to be sought. Relativism thus tends to view Socratic maieutics as arrogant or authoritarian, too abstract and disconnected from reality.

**The Violence of Socrates**

From the perspective of postmodern relativism, Socrates can be perceived as violent because he imposes an absolute and universal truth on his interlocutors, thereby denying the legitimacy of their subjective perspectives.

Postmodern relativism, which values the plurality of viewpoints and the absence of objective truth, clashes with the Socratic method that seeks to demonstrate the superiority of a single, rational truth. By reducing all opinions to a single rational logic, Socrates eclipses diverse individual experiences and ignores the validity of personal interpretations of reality. For a relativist, this imposition of reason as the ultimate criterion of truth can be seen as a form of intellectual violence, since it compels individuals to abandon their own truths in order to conform to an imposed standard. Thus, Socrates appears to deny the intellectual autonomy of his interlocutors, forcing them to acknowledge an external truth rather than allowing multiple and contingent visions of the world to emerge. This approach can be judged oppressive, as it refuses the possibility that individuals may hold truths of their own, truths that differ from one another.

## THE ETHICS OF CARE

The ethics of care, or the ethics of “caring”, is a moral approach centered on relational responsibility, attention to others, and human vulnerability. It stands in contrast to traditional ethics founded on abstract and universal principles, such as those of Kant or Rawls, by emphasizing concrete situations, affective bonds, and particular contexts. Born from the work of Carol Gilligan in the 1980s, it critiques the primacy of impersonal justice in favor of an ethics rooted in lived experience, especially that of women and caregivers. Care is not limited to an emotion or a compassionate impulse: it is an active commitment to the other, a recognition of human interdependence. It comprises four dimensions: attention (perceiving the need), responsibility (feeling concerned), competence (acting effectively), and responsiveness (receiving the other’s response). This

ethics highlights the importance of the body, fragility, and often invisible inequalities. It values daily care, which is frequently devalued in social and economic hierarchies. In sum, care proposes a reconfiguration of the political and the moral based on shared vulnerability, listening, and concrete solicitude.

For Carol Gilligan, the approach is more about confronting perspectives than about Socratic-style questioning. She privileges the dialogue of voices rather than identifying contradictions and deconstructing presuppositions in order to reach a transcendent, unique, and abstract truth. She values the plurality of moral reasonings, for example by contrasting the “feminine” voice of care with the “masculine” voice of abstract justice. She sets these perspectives in tension without ranking them. She uses narrative, lived stories, as primary material, not analysis or reasoning. She establishes a productive confrontation, not a dialectical “duel”. Whereas the Socratic questioning tends to be conflictual, exposing ignorance so that truth may impose itself, Gilligan proposes a cooperative framework where perspectives enrich one another. It is a logic of inclusion, not of true-or-false. Emotion is not an obstacle but a resource. Moral conflicts are signs of values to be explored, not errors to be corrected. Formal intellectual approaches tend to disconnect morality from its experiential and relational roots. Gilligan insists that morality must be understood in its human complexity, which implies taking emotions, intuitions, and social interactions into account. Where Socrates seeks aporia to bring forth the universal, Gilligan seeks resonance to bring forth shared meaning.

Questioning persists, but in another form; she does not renounce critical demand but reconfigures it. One asks, “How do you feel about this conflict?” rather than “Why is your definition false?” The aim is to understand where the interlocutor speaks from, not to trap them in contradiction. The questioning is

more “horizontal”, assuming its relational biases against the Socratic myth of neutrality. It is a meeting in which each is transformed. Gilligan replaces the art of intellectual refutation with the art of translation between moral worlds. She does not reject questioning but redirects it toward a hermeneutics of perspectives. The “meta” dimension (analysis of foundations) persists, but it emerges from lived conflicts, as a hermeneutics of perspectives, not from pure reason. In this sense, her method is perhaps closer to Greek tragedy, for instance Antigone against Creon, than to Platonic dialogue: contradictions are not resolved but inhabited.

Thus, Carol Gilligan is animated above all by a moral concern, which manifests itself in human relationships, lived ethical dilemmas, and responsibilities toward others. One can detect a certain anti-intellectual pragmatism, in the sense that she is oriented more toward concrete experience and the practical consequences of ideas than toward the pursuit of abstract truths and the exercise of reason. Unlike approaches such as that of Socrates, which emphasize formal skills like argumentation, dialectic, or conceptualization, Gilligan explores morality through an experiential, emotional, and relational perspective. Her work shares some common ground with postmodernism, since she critiques grand moral narratives and values marginalized perspectives and intersecting voices. Yet she proposes a positive alternative, the ethics of care, which may be seen as a new norm. In this sense, she goes against strict postmodern relativism, since she remains attached to humanist values and a constructive vision of ethics, distinguishing her from strict postmodern thinkers.

**The Violence of Socrates**

From the perspective of the ethics of care, the Socratic practice can appear violent for several fundamental reasons, linked to its critical posture, its demand for truth, and its indifference to the immediate emotional needs of the interlocutor.

Socrates seeks to unsettle certainties, to provoke intellectual discomfort, even humiliation, without regard for his interlocutor's emotional state. This brutal exposure can be perceived as a form of psychic violence. The ethics of care values listening, empathy, and the affective recognition of the other. Socrates, however, aims at logical coherence and truth, often at the expense of affect, which may be felt as a refusal of moral care. One may see here the primacy of arbitrary *logos* over *pathos*. Where care attends to lived fragility, Socrates pushes it to the breaking point. He does not heal the wound; he opens it, even exacerbates it. This may be interpreted as violence, especially if the interlocutor is not ready to confront their own limits. It can appear as indifference to subjective vulnerability. Socrates does not console. He does not reassure. He prefers lucidity to comfort, following the path of reason. For the ethics of care, which places relational healing at the center, this can be seen as ethical neglect. By confronting an individual brutally with their contradictions, without a protective net, Socratic maieutics may reactivate unresolved wounds, or even risk retraumatization, which, within the paradigm of care, would be considered an ethical fault.

Furthermore, Socratic universalism is perceived as dogmatic because it imposes abstract norms that neglect the concrete realities of human relationships. The idea of a universal truth or virtue, as defended by Socrates, overlooks marginalized voices, ignores concrete human relations, and the specific contexts in which moral decisions are made.

Above all, in the dialogues, Socrates assumes a dominant position, feigning ignorance while mastering the art of trapping the other. The ethics of care seeks instead symmetry, an authentic sharing of relational power, sincerity. Thus, Socratic practice appears violent in the eyes of the ethics of care because it values truth over benevolence, awakening to lucidity over emotional safety. It embodies an ethics of shock, whereas care proposes an ethics of gentleness.

## WOKISM

Wokism refers to a contemporary current of thought and social action, derived from postmodernism, characterized by heightened vigilance toward systemic injustices, particularly those related to identity, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and toward any group of individuals ignored or oppressed. Originating from the African American expression *"stay woke"* (to remain awake or vigilant), it promotes awareness of privilege and oppression through an intersectional lens, emphasizing the overlapping of various structural or institutional injustices. Drawing on critical and postcolonial theories, it seeks to expose power dynamics and promote inclusion by denouncing systemic privilege and oppressive behaviors. Its supporters see it as a legitimate pursuit of social justice, while its detractors criticize it for moral dogmatism, a culture of victimhood, and a tendency to polarize public debate by rigidly categorizing individuals according to their identities. Today, the term is often used pejoratively by opponents to designate a set of "progressive" ideas considered excessive or intolerant, particularly for its binary polarization of debates.

More radical than postmodernism, wokism goes so far as to claim that the subject can define and name themselves independently of any preexisting

essence or category, rejecting any form of “objectivity” in this domain as oppressive. One can thus construct one’s own identity and personal “narrative”, a scheme seen as either an outgrowth or a practical evolution of postmodernism. Yet this specific application sometimes betrays postmodern principles by adopting prescriptive or moralizing positions that appear to contradict its initial relativism or skepticism, reintroducing new forms of absolute truths. For example, the idea that all forms of oppression must be fought according to a fixed hierarchy seems to contradict the anti-universalist spirit of postmodernism. According to theorists of this ideology, racism, particularly anti-Black racism, would be placed at the top of this hierarchy. Sexism and feminist struggle would follow, while other forms of oppression, linked to social class, disability, or religious discrimination, would be relegated to secondary positions. This implicit hierarchy is perceived as a rigid framework dictating whose voices must be amplified and which struggles should take priority.

At the same time, an essentialist dimension appears: although this movement promotes identity fluidity and criticizes power structures, it also freezes identities into rigid and immutable categories, risking the reinforcement of divisions by assigning fixed experiences, roles, or oppressions to groups. For example, a person is defined above all by their identity markers, race, gender, etc., which are presumed to determine opinions, sufferings, or privileges. Social interactions are then analyzed primarily through the prism of these affiliations, reducing individuals to representatives of a collective category. Critics thus perceive a tension between the proclaimed dynamic of intersectionality and an implicit tendency to treat identities as immutable essences, limiting human complexity.

Another key manifestation of wokism is *cancel culture*, referring to the phenomenon of boycotting, sanctioning, or publicly ostracizing individuals or organizations considered problematic. It typically involves collective mobilization, especially on social media, to withdraw platforms of expression or economic support from those whose words or actions are deemed offensive or morally unacceptable. This approach is often punitive, excluding nuance or dialogue. Individuals are frequently classified simplistically as either “allies” or “oppressors”, leaving no room for mistakes or gray areas. Defenders view it as a form of social justice enabling marginalized groups to exercise power against abuses, while critics denounce disproportionate reactions, moral rigidity, lack of nuance, and a threat to freedom of expression, since cancel culture can create a climate of fear and self-censorship where strict conformity to established norms takes precedence over collective understanding.

**The Violence of Socrates**

As a movement centered on social justice, the denunciation of oppression, and the questioning of power structures, wokism could interpret Socrates as “violent” or problematic in certain aspects of his method and ideas, particularly regarding ethics, inclusion, and power dynamics.

The Socratic method, which consists in asking relentless questions to trap an interlocutor in logical contradictions, could be perceived as a form of intellectual violence. In a sense, Socrates often imposes his own mode of reasoning without regard for the perspectives or sensitivities of his interlocutors. This radical interrogative style can appear humiliating or exclusionary to those who do not share the same rhetorical or logical codes, effectively silencing different voices.

Although Socrates presents himself as a humble philosopher, he nonetheless occupies a privileged position as a free male citizen of Athens, and respected thinker. His approach may be criticized for ignoring social inequalities and implicitly reproducing the hierarchies of his time. He does not directly address the injustices suffered by women, slaves, or foreigners in Athenian society. By focusing on abstract debates with male elites, he could be accused of passive complicity with the oppressive structures of his era. Socrates seeks universal truths while disregarding the social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape these concepts. In this sense, he imposes an “Eurocentric” vision disconnected from lived realities, erasing the specific experiences of marginalized groups. By privileging reason over emotion, he perpetuates a hierarchy of knowledge that devalues more intuitive or experiential approaches, often associated with historically oppressed groups.

Socratic philosophical language, though claiming to be accessible, remains centered on abstract concepts and complex logical arguments. This can be perceived as a form of linguistic violence or exclusion. He privileges rational dialogue that excludes those unfamiliar with his cultural or intellectual codes. His discussions on notions such as “the good” or “truth” seem detached from the practical urgencies faced by the oppressed. While Socrates criticizes sophists and Athenian rulers, he nevertheless accepts certain oppressive institutions of his time, such as slavery and male domination, a form of implicit complicity with systems of oppression. At his trial, Socrates chooses to remain faithful to his principles rather than flee Athens, which could be interpreted as tacit acceptance of the injustices of the Athenian legal system.

Socrates places strong emphasis on individual virtue and personal responsibility, which could be seen as minimizing structural oppression.

Wokism, by contrast, insists on the importance of combating systemic injustice rather than focusing only on individual change. By affirming that “a just life is a happy life”, Socrates underestimates the material and economic constraints that prevent many from living with dignity.

## UTILITARIAN PRAGMATISM

Utilitarian pragmatism, an approach combining the principles of utilitarianism, such as the maximization of well-being, and the pragmatist method of evaluating ideas by their practical consequences, could criticize the Socratic method on several fundamental points.

Socratic maieutics aims to “midwife” minds into truth, but it often produces only *aporia*, a state of puzzlement that is left to be contemplated. For a utilitarian, a method that does not lead to applicable solutions, such as improving happiness or resolving social problems, is ineffective, even sterile. For instance, in the *Euthyphro*, Socrates discusses piety without ever providing a satisfactory definition. A pragmatist would judge this useless, since it does not help one make better decisions in real life.

Socrates values self-knowledge and truth as ends in themselves. But for a utilitarian like Bentham or Mill, the ultimate goal of thinking must be the increase of collective happiness. Yet Socrates offers no criterion to assess whether his dialogues actually improve well-being, for example, by reducing suffering or optimizing laws. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates ridicules the sophists’ rhetoric, but provides no practical alternative for persuasion in politics, which for a utilitarian is counterproductive.

Socratic dialectic rests on an individual and demanding exchange, reserved for a minority, mainly wealthy and leisured Athenian citizens. A pragmatist thinker like John Dewey would reproach him for the lack of accessibility and for failing to institutionalize his method for the education of the masses. In contrast, pragmatism advocates tools suited to the greatest number, such as experimental education or progressive social reforms.

Socrates scorns passions and bodily desires, whereas utilitarianism integrates them into the "calculus of happiness". Mill, for example, combines a quantitative approach, maximizing overall happiness, with a qualitative one, privileging higher pleasures. This distinction makes it possible to go beyond a purely hedonistic vision of happiness by including intellectual and moral dimensions, while remaining faithful to the utilitarian principle of maximizing well-being. Socrates' purely rational method ignores an essential lever of human motivation, which renders it ineffective for influencing behavior.

By requiring absolute certainty before acting, the pursuit of "true ideas", Socrates risks encouraging inaction. Yet for pragmatists such as William James, an idea is true if it "works" in practice, even provisionally. A utilitarian politician will prefer an imperfect but useful law over endless reflection on the ideal of justice. A Platonist would respond that the utilitarian criticism misses the essential point: Socratic philosophy is a therapy of the soul, not a tool for social management. Its aim is liberation from illusion, a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for just action.

Thus, utilitarian pragmatism reproaches Socrates for his ineffectual idealism, his disregard for practical consequences, and his elitist individualism. For pragmatism, a philosophy that is not judged by its concrete impact on collective happiness is a vain philosophy. In societies oriented toward efficiency

and results, as ours is, the patient search for meaning may seem useless. Socratic questioning, which does not aim at an immediate solution but rather at the elucidation of meaning, can appear as a waste of time or an intellectual luxury.

**The Violence of Socrates**

From the standpoint of utilitarian pragmatism, Socrates can be perceived as violent because his method disregards the practical and concrete results of human actions. Utilitarianism, which values effectiveness and the consequences of an action in terms of happiness and well-being, conflicts with the Socratic method, which seeks abstract truth without concern for its application in everyday reality.

By insisting on the pursuit of pure truth, Socrates neglects the immediate and practical needs of individuals and may push them to question beliefs or values that are crucial to their emotional and social stability. Through this insistence on truth at any cost, Socrates might be seen as creating psychological imbalances, leading his interlocutors into anxiety or confusion without offering concrete solutions. Furthermore, his intellectual approach, detached from the practical consequences of human actions, appears, through a pragmatist lens, as a form of violence, since it disregards the tangible effects on individuals' well-being in their daily lives.

## CONFORMISM

Conformism is a tendency to adopt the behaviors, ideas, or values dominant in a group or society, often without critical questioning. It consists of adapting to prevailing norms in order to be accepted, avoid conflict, or gain social

recognition. Conformism rests on the implicit or explicit pressure exerted by the group, which pushes the individual to renounce their particularities, their questions, or their divergent opinions in order to blend into the mass. It is expressed through adherence to collective norms: individuals must adjust their actions or opinions to correspond to those of the majority group or a recognized authority. A renunciation of critical thinking, for rather than seeking to understand or evaluate ideas or practices for oneself, conformism encourages the passive acceptance of dominant ideas. By favoring the adoption of established ideas and behaviors, conformism tends to maintain the established order and to slow down changes or epistemological breaks. This attitude can be motivated by several factors. The fear of exclusion, when the individual fears being marginalized or rejected if they do not conform to the expectations of the group, if they do not follow established conventions. The desire for acceptance and success, for the need for belonging and social validation encourages alignment with majority opinions. The absence of critical reflection, since conformism implies passive adherence to received ideas without thorough analysis. Cultural influence, since traditions, media, or institutions can reinforce certain norms, making their adoption almost automatic. Conformism can have ambivalent effects. On the one hand, it promotes social cohesion by creating common rules. But it tends to limit creativity, innovation, and individual expression. By inhibiting the questioning of established ideas, it tends to perpetuate collective prejudices or errors. Conversely, Socrates, through his nonconformist side, may be appealing in our individualistic and narcissistic societies. He represents rebellion against the power of the powerful, against institutions. Except that contemporary nonconformist individualism does not rest on reason like Socrates, but on passions, emotions, indignation, simple subjectivity, on a “rebel” dogma.

Although paradoxically, it thus seeks to rally the herd, to find its own, and to engender a new conformism, a new morality. It is the conformism of nonconformism, very popular today.

**The violence of Socrates**

Conformism could find Socrates violent for several reasons. The questioning of established beliefs. Socrates pushes individuals to challenge their beliefs, opinions, and prejudices widely accepted by society. For a conformist mind, accustomed to following norms and dominant ideas without criticizing them, this insistence may seem aggressive or destabilizing, for it highlights aberrations or internal contradictions.

Conformism rests on the idea that collectively admitted truths are sufficient and reassuring. Yet Socrates, by exploring the flaws of these common truths, appears as a threat to the implicit social order that conformism seeks to maintain. This confrontation with what the group considers “obvious” can be experienced as a form of intellectual aggression, an implicit attack on collective authority.

Socratic irony can be perceived by a conformist as a public humiliation. Rather than feeling accompanied in a process of reflection, in taking distance, the interlocutor may experience this approach as a provocation or a will to devalue their certainties.

Socrates embodies a figure who refuses to bend to social expectations when they conflict with reason, with the search for truth. For conformist minds, this philosophical individualism may seem provocative, even threatening, for it calls into question the idea that security lies in passive acceptance of norms. By forcing his interlocutors to recognize their ignorance, by questioning their way of thinking and being, Socrates provokes an existential crisis that may be

experienced as violent. A conformist, who finds comfort in adherence to majority ideas, risks perceiving this awareness as a brutal break with his habitual way of thinking.

Socrates encourages everyone to think for themselves rather than blindly relying on common opinion. This message is intrinsically subversive for a conformist, who values above all social harmony and obedience to the group's implicit rules.

Thus, conformism would see Socrates as "violent" because he upsets the established order, destabilizes shared certainties, and demands a personal effort to think critically and autonomously. This violence touches the deep beliefs, the personal and social identity of those who adhere to the general consensus. In an environment where one must adjust to the group, to consensus or to common opinion, the Socratic questioning, which seeks the singularity of thinking, can be perceived as asocial, nihilistic, and disruptive.

## PERVASIVE ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM

Anti-intellectualism, which rejects or minimizes the importance of abstract reflection, rationality, and intellectual ideals, of life of the mind in general in favor of practical, emotional, or immediate experiences, will severely criticize the Socratic approach. This criticism, very common today, though very human, rests on the fact that Socrates privileges a rational, universal approach, detached from concrete realities and the affective dimensions of human life. Anti-intellectualism criticizes this rationalist vision, affirming that emotions, instincts, and immediate experiences are just as essential, if not more important, than reason in understanding the human condition. For example, a

person confronted with a loss or an injustice may feel strong emotions, such as anger or sadness, which cannot be resolved by logical reasoning. By privileging reason, the Socratic approach risks disembodying human experience, ignoring the emotional and bodily dimensions that define our existence. One could even criticize Socrates for having ignored the emotional sufferings of his interlocutors when he pushed them to recognize their ignorance or contradictions.

Anti-intellectualism criticizes the quest for universality by emphasizing that abstract truths are often disconnected from practical realities and individual experiences. What works in a theoretical framework does not necessarily correspond to the concrete needs of daily life. The Socratic approach is perceived as too idealistic, for it supposes that human problems can be solved by reason alone, without considering material or social constraints. An anti-intellectualist could criticize Socrates for having ignored the concrete economic or political realities of Athens, preferring abstract philosophical discussions. Socrates values rational and universal knowledge, often at the expense of practical, empirical, or traditional knowledge. He considers that only critical reasoning can lead to truth. Anti-intellectualism criticizes this hierarchy of knowledge by affirming that practical knowledge, artisanal or transmitted by tradition, is just as valuable, if not more, than intellectual knowledge. For example, an artisan or a peasant possesses skills and knowledge stemming from direct experience, even a “popular” wisdom, which cannot be replaced by abstract reflections. The Socratic approach can be perceived as elitist, even contemptuous, for it seems to give more value to intellectuals and philosophers than to individuals engaged in practical or manual activities. Socrates often criticizes sophists or common people for their lack of

understanding of universal truths, which could be seen as a form of contempt for non-academic knowledge.

Socrates assumes that moral and rational truths are universal and applicable to all, regardless of social, cultural, or historical contexts, which is unrealistic and impractical. Anti-intellectualism criticizes this universality by insisting that moral values and norms are always contextual and shaped by traditions, cultures, or local experiences. For example, an agricultural community could have notions of justice or virtue different from those of an urban society, making Socratic ideals inapplicable. The Socratic approach is often perceived as disconnected from social realities and power dynamics, since it focuses on abstract ideals rather than on the concrete struggles of individuals. Thus, anti-intellectualism criticizes the Socratic approach for its over-rationalism, its abstract universalism, its implicit contempt for practical knowledge, and its disconnection from concrete realities. Where Socrates values reason and universal ideals, anti-intellectualism emphasizes emotions, immediate experiences, and local knowledge as essential elements of human life. These criticisms show that the Socratic method, though admirable in its ambition of rational clarification, too cerebral or disconnected, is often perceived as too far from daily realities and the concrete needs of individuals. Anti-intellectualism thus invites us to reevaluate the importance of emotional, practical, and contextual dimensions in the understanding of the human condition.

**The violence of Socrates**

Seen from the perspective of pervasive anti-intellectualism, Socrates may be perceived as violent because his dialectical method is often seen as a form of

excessive intellectualization, disconnected from daily and practical concerns. In a society where practical knowledge and hands-on experience are valued, Socrates' incessant quest for abstract truth, through philosophical questions, may seem needlessly complex and distant from lived realities. For those who privilege immediate action and pragmatic solutions, Socrates appears as a figure who imposes constant reflection and mental analysis, thus reducing the space for concrete and immediate action. His method, which pushes individuals to question all their certainties, can be seen as a useless intellectual torment, especially in a world where people often seek simple and immediate answers. This approach may seem violent because it destabilizes convictions and practices that are essential to the social and personal stability of individuals, particularly for those who find no immediate usefulness in philosophical reflection.

## CONSUMERISM

Consumerism, as an ideology and way of life centered on material consumption and the satisfaction of primary needs as the main source of happiness and personal fulfillment, stands in sharp opposition to the Socratic approach. This opposition rests on fundamental differences in their conceptions of happiness, virtue, truth, and the purpose of human existence.

For Socrates, true happiness derives from virtue and rational knowledge. He asserts that self-understanding and truth lead to a life well lived. Consumerism proposes a radically different vision of happiness, based on the immediate satisfaction of desires through the consumption of material goods or pleasurable experiences. It regards the Socratic approach as too abstract and detached from immediate pleasures. For a consumer, the pursuit of virtue or

truth may seem pointless compared to the concrete satisfactions offered by products. A follower of consumerism could criticize Socrates for neglecting sensory and material pleasures, considered essential to modern well-being. Unlike Socrates' concern for universality, consumerism rests on a relativistic view of values, where what matters is the subjective satisfaction of individual desires. It denies the existence of universal truths or fixed moral principles: what is "good" or "valid" depends on personal preferences and cultural context. It criticizes abstract ideals such as justice or wisdom, which seem disconnected from the practical realities and immediate desires of individuals. A consumer could see the Socratic quest for truth as a waste of time, preferring to focus on tangible and instant pleasures.

Socrates values self-mastery and the rational discipline of desires. For him, material or sensual pleasures must be subordinated to virtue and wisdom. Consumerism, on the contrary, encourages the liberation of desires and their immediate fulfillment. It promotes the pursuit of pleasures without moral or rational constraint. For example, modern advertising slogans urge people to "enjoy life" or to "live carefree", often at the expense of any ethical consideration. Consumerism sees Socrates' call for self-mastery as a form of repression of natural instincts. It rejects the idea that virtue or reason could guide life choices. A consumer might criticize Socrates for his moral asceticism, perceived as a denial of legitimate pleasures offered by modern society. Consumerism places material wealth and immediate enjoyment at the center of human life. It holds that the accumulation of goods and the satisfaction of desires are the ultimate aims of existence. Modern ideals of success, such as social status or the possession of luxury goods, reflect this materialist conception of life. Whereas Socrates seeks to transcend material pleasures to reach higher ideals, consumerism glorifies their pursuit as an end in itself. A

consumer might accuse Socrates of despising earthly pleasures and of promoting an austere life disconnected from human realities. Socrates actively engages his interlocutors in critical questioning of their beliefs, values, and behaviors. He encourages constant reflection on how to live and on social structures. Consumerism fosters a form of conformist passivity, in which individuals follow trends dictated by advertising and media without questioning the underlying economic or social systems. Socrates would criticize consumerism for its role in manipulating desires and promoting blind conformism. He would see in this ideology a threat to the intellectual and moral freedom of individuals. He might denounce advertising as a modern form of sophistry, manipulating the masses to serve economic interests.

In conclusion, consumerism stands opposed to the Socratic approach on almost every level. Happiness: Socrates privileges virtue and reason, while consumerism values the immediate satisfaction of material desires. Truth: Socrates seeks universal truths, while consumerism adopts a subjective relativism. Virtue: Socrates advocates self-mastery, while consumerism encourages the liberation of desires. The purpose of life: Socrates aspires to a contemplative and spiritual life, while consumerism glorifies material wealth and sensory pleasures. Social engagement: Socrates engages individuals in critical reflection, while consumerism locks them into passive conformism.

**The violence of Socrates**

Seen through the lens of consumerism, Socrates may be perceived as violent because he opposes the relentless pursuit of immediate gratification and the logic of consumption that characterizes modern society. Unlike a culture in which the individual is encouraged to constantly seek excitement and pleasure

through the purchase of material goods or the consumption of experiences, Socrates insists on the importance of reflection, detachment, and the search for inner truth. In a society that values the constant desire for novelty and immediate satisfaction, Socrates appears as an obstacle to this dynamic, since his method invites the reduction of desires and the pursuit of durable intellectual satisfaction rather than superficial gratification. By forcing individuals to question their cravings and beliefs, he may be seen as an antagonist to consumerist culture, creating a form of psychological violence by asking people to renounce immediate pleasure in favor of a more abstract quest for truth. This disruption of daily comfort and the cycle of consumption seems violent in a world where consumption is a source of emotional and social stability.

## NARCISSISM

Narcissism, a growing phenomenon in modern societies, is characterized by excessive self-focus, a quest for external validation, and an overvaluation of personal image. It stands in sharp opposition to the Socratic approach. This opposition rests on fundamental differences in their conceptions of knowledge, virtue, intellectual humility, and the relation to others.

First, intellectual humility. Socrates is famous for his paradoxical claim: *"I know that I know nothing."* He holds that recognizing one's ignorance is the first step toward wisdom and virtue. His philosophical mission thus consists in revealing to others their own ignorance, in order to incite them to seek truth. Modern narcissism rejects this intellectual humility, as it relies on self-aggrandizement and a constant pursuit of recognition. A narcissist often perceives himself as superior to others and seeks to assert this superiority. Social networks amplify

this phenomenon by encouraging individuals to present an idealized image of themselves, often without self-examination.

Narcissism might criticize Socrates for his insistence on intellectual humility, perceived as weakness or as self-undervaluation. For a narcissist, acknowledging ignorance would be unacceptable. A narcissist could accuse Socrates of promoting a degrading vision of the individual, contrary to the self-assertion deemed necessary for personal success.

For Socrates, virtue is intrinsically linked to justice and collective well-being. He holds that true virtue cannot exist without attention to others and to the community. Modern narcissism places self-interest at the center of all actions. Social relations are often instrumentalized to serve the ego rather than to promote the common good. A narcissist may exploit others to gain admiration, power, or resources, without concern for their well-being. For a narcissist, values such as moral altruism and social justice appear useless or naïve in the face of the necessity of personal success.

Socrates values critical questioning and the honest pursuit of truth. He encourages individuals to examine their beliefs and challenge their certainties. Modern narcissism, however, is built upon a search for external validation, where the individual seeks recognition and admiration regardless of truth or reality. This quest often eclipses any willingness to self-question. “Likes” and positive comments on social media become indicators of personal worth, disconnected from critical reflection. Narcissism thus criticizes Socrates for his insistence on self-examination and questioning appearances. For a narcissist, such introspection could threaten the idealized image he wishes to project. He would likely avoid any Socratic dialogue that could reveal his weaknesses or contradictions.

Socrates uses dialogue as a method to help others progress toward truth and virtue. He holds that human interactions must be based on cooperation and mutual respect. For example, in the *Gorgias*, Socrates engages in constructive dialogue with Callicles, even though their viewpoints strongly differ. Modern narcissism, on the other hand, instrumentalizes human relations, turning them into means of gaining admiration, power, or personal advantage. It sees the Socratic dialogue as a potential threat to the ego, since it exposes ignorance and contradiction. For a narcissist, dialogue must serve to reinforce his image, not to question it. He may therefore avoid any critical interaction, preferring flattering or superficial exchanges.

Socrates maintains that the ultimate purpose of life is the search for truth and the realization of virtue. He values the contemplative and philosophical life as superior to the pursuit of material wealth or glory. Modern narcissism places personal glory and social recognition at the center of existence. Success is measured by notoriety, status, or influence over others. Social media influencers embody this pursuit of glory, where public image outweighs all other considerations.

These two visions are radically incompatible: where Socrates seeks to transcend selfish desires to reach higher ideals, narcissism glorifies their immediate and ostentatious satisfaction. A narcissist could view the Socratic quest for truth as a waste of time, preferring to focus on the accumulation of likes or followers.

These divergences show that narcissism and the Socratic approach represent two diametrically opposed visions of human existence: one oriented toward critical reflection and the common good, the other toward validation and self-assertion.

**The Violence of Socrates**

From the perspective of narcissism, Socrates can be perceived as violent because his dialectical method undermines the self-image that individuals strive to protect. Narcissism, which values self-admiration and the preservation of personal image, clashes with the Socratic practice, which pushes individuals to recognize their weaknesses, errors, and contradictions. For someone deeply attached to their self-image, the Socratic questioning may be experienced as a direct attack on self-esteem, as it forces one to doubt certainties and accept imperfections. By exposing weaknesses and dismantling false knowledge, Socrates may be seen as an aggressor of the ego. In a society where narcissism is increasingly valued, his method becomes a form of psychological violence, as it calls for liberation from illusions of personal grandeur and confrontation with the reality of human imperfection. This can generate deep discomfort, even rejection, among those who feel vulnerable in the face of such a radical challenge to their identity.

## POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Positive psychology, although not fundamentally opposed to the Socratic questioning, can, in some of its forms, come into tension with the Socratic posture.

Developed notably by Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, positive psychology focuses on human well-being, individual strengths, resilience, and positive emotions as sources of personal growth. While the Socratic approach aims to improve virtue and wisdom through reason, positive psychology could

criticize it for its lack of attention to emotional dimensions, subjective positivity, and overall well-being.

Positive psychology challenges the principle of mastering emotions through reason, emphasizing that positive emotions such as joy, gratitude, and hope play a crucial role in well-being and self-actualization. These emotions are not obstacles to virtue but essential drivers of growth and resilience. According to Barbara Fredrickson, positive emotions broaden our repertoire of actions and strengthen our psychological resources, which is incompatible with an approach that minimizes their importance. By focusing on reason and virtue, Socrates risks neglecting the subjective aspects of happiness, such as the satisfaction of living positive and enriching experiences. Thus, a person may lead a life deemed “virtuous” according to Socratic criteria, yet lack joy or deep meaning, which positive psychology would see as a deficiency.

Positive psychology criticizes Socratic universalism by stressing the importance of individual strengths such as creativity, curiosity, or perseverance, and traits unique to each person. It proposes a more personalized approach to human development. In this sense, the Socratic approach is seen as too rigid and uniform, ignoring the richness of individual and cultural differences. Positive psychology emphasizes the need to adapt practices of well-being to each person. For instance, an introverted person may find more happiness in creative solitude, while an extroverted person may prefer social interaction, something Socrates would not take into account.

The Socratic method relies on rational dialogue aimed at clarifying ideas and exposing logical contradictions. However, this approach may seem cold or detached from emotional and relational realities. Positive psychology criticizes this method by claiming that well-being cannot be attained solely through

rational reflection. More holistic approaches, including practices such as meditation, self-compassion, or positive relationships, are necessary. Interventions from positive psychology, such as gratitude exercises or positive visualizations, show that well-being stems from concrete, engaging experiences, not only from abstract reasoning.

The Socratic method, which exposes ignorance and contradictions, could generate frustration or demotivation in some individuals, which runs counter to the principles of positive psychology. An individual confronted with his rational limits may feel discouraged, whereas positive psychology seeks to strengthen confidence and motivation.

Socrates emphasizes the rational individual capable of attaining virtue through personal reflection. He seems to ignore the importance of social relations and collective dynamics in human well-being. For example, in *The Symposium*, Socrates discusses love as a philosophical ideal, but without considering the concrete relational aspects that nourish well-being. Positive psychology critiques this individualistic vision by stressing that positive relationships, empathy, and social support are essential pillars of well-being, since compassion and a sense of community play a central role in happiness and resilience. The Socratic approach is often perceived as too abstract and detached from social realities. Positive psychology insists on the importance of creating environments conducive to collective well-being. For example, a collaborative and benevolent work setting contributes more to well-being than an environment focused solely on rational performance.

Positive psychology seeks to value strengths, positive emotions, gratitude, optimism, and so on. It aims to enhance psychological well-being. The Socratic questioning, however, introduces disturbance: a doubt about what one

believes to know. It does not seek to comfort the subject in his beliefs but to interrogate them, sometimes incisively, which can cause discomfort or unease. In a purely “positive” logic, doubt can be seen as counterproductive, even harmful to immediate well-being, leading instead to positive reinforcement rather than doubt.

Positive psychology promotes self-acceptance and self-compassion, which can sometimes become strategies of avoidance, shielding the individual from confronting his contradictions. Socrates, by contrast, seeks the fertile tension between what we say and what we think, between our principles and our actions. He invites inner conflict as a driver of lucidity. Positive psychology often centers on the individual: his emotions, well-being, personal goals. Socratic questioning, by contrast, is fundamentally dialogical. It presupposes otherness, confrontation with another as a mirror of oneself. In a softened version of positive psychology, this otherness may be reduced to mere empathic support, without critical demand.

Certain uses of positive psychology, as in coaching or management, aim primarily at performance, motivation, or adaptation to the system. This can distort its initial intent. In its simplified or utilitarian form, it can become an ideology of avoiding questioning, of seeking immediate harmony rather than demanding truth. Socrates, however, does not aim to “help” the other adapt, but to know himself, which may lead him to go against the current, even to marginalization.

Thus, positive psychology criticizes the Socratic approach for its over-rationalism, abstract universalism, neglect of positive emotions, and lack of attention to individual strengths and social relations. Where Socrates values reason and universal virtue, positive psychology highlights positive emotions,

personal strengths, and relational dynamics as key elements of well-being. Positive psychology therefore calls for a more integrative and holistic vision of personal and collective development. Nevertheless, positive psychology is not inherently incompatible with the Socratic posture, especially if it includes lucidity, authenticity, and the search for meaning.

**The Violence of Socrates**

From the perspective of positive psychology, Socrates may be perceived as violent because his dialectical method relentlessly exposes contradictions and inner weaknesses, which runs counter to the idea of a constructive approach to well-being. Positive psychology favors optimism, self-fulfillment, and the cultivation of personal strengths to improve quality of life, while Socrates appears to focus on identifying human flaws and errors. By urging individuals to doubt their convictions, recognize their ignorance, and confront their imperfections, he risks plunging them into a state of confusion or anxiety rather than leading them to satisfaction and fulfillment. The Socratic approach, by demolishing illusions and drawing attention to what is imperfect or contradictory, may be perceived as destabilizing, since it does not seek to value strengths or reinforce self-confidence, but rather to highlight the limits of the human condition. Thus, from the perspective of positive psychology, this method could be seen as a form of emotional violence, as it prevents the individual from focusing on his achievements and potential.

## EGALITARIANISM AND DEMOCRACY

Egalitarianism and democracy, though seemingly compatible with the Socratic spirit, through dialogue, deliberation, and the refusal of imposed authority, can

also, in some forms, come into tension with the posture of the Socratic questioning.

Modern egalitarianism sometimes tends to affirm that “every opinion is worth as much as another”, an epistemological relativism legitimized in the name of respect for persons. Yet the Socratic questioning rests precisely on a distinction between *doxic* opinion, mere belief, and grounded knowledge. It tests ideas, subjects them to examination, seeks out inconsistencies, and establishes hierarchies of validity. Thus, in a poorly understood egalitarian context, the Socratic posture can be perceived as elitist, even arrogant, with the objection: “Who are you to challenge what I think?”

In a democracy, legitimacy often rests on voting, numbers, consensus. Yet Socrates obeys neither the majority nor the dominant opinion: he questions, even against all, even at the cost of his life. From this perspective, democracy can become a form of hidden conformism: the voice of the people, or of the group, becomes untouchable. The questioner then becomes the one who disturbs social peace or the tacit collective contract.

Socratism presupposes equality in the dignity of interlocutors, but not equality in the validity of discourses. Yet a democratic culture can easily slide into confusion between respect for the person and respect for every statement. This amounts to saying: if you criticize my idea, you are criticizing me. This psychological slide prevents the Socratic dialogue, which distinguishes between the person and the content of their speech.

In an individualist democracy, any form of authority is often perceived as suspect. Yet Socrates, though he calls himself ignorant, exercises intellectual authority: that which stems from his rigor, his logical demand, his capacity to expose contradictions. This can be perceived as an attempt at domination,

whereas egalitarian ideology expects a flat, horizontal exchange, without tension or argumentative hierarchy.

Egalitarianism and democracy can thus paradoxically hinder Socratic practice, if they are understood as the sanctification of individual opinion or the search for collective comfort. But if they are understood as openness to debate, to the responsibility of thinking, then they can, on the contrary, become fertile ground for questioning.

One may also ask whether Socrates is a democrat or an aristocrat, insofar as this political debate was important in Athens. Socrates never explicitly defended a particular political system in the writings that have come down to us, essentially through Plato, but his critical attitude toward Athenian democracy and his implicit preference for a form of intellectual elitism suggest that he leaned more toward aristocratic ideas, though he was not an aristocrat in the strict sense.

Socrates lived in Athens, a city governed by a system of direct democracy, where all adult male citizens had the right to participate in political decisions. However, he was critical of this system, which he perceived as inefficient and dangerous. According to him, democracy fosters mediocrity and allows popular passions to dominate reason. He considered that many citizens were incapable of ruling wisely because of their ignorance and lack of virtue. For example, Socrates argued that the Athenians had condemned innocent generals to death and had often made irrational decisions under the influence of sophistic rhetoric. But unlike many Athenians of his time, Socrates was not actively engaged in democratic political life. He claimed that his philosophical mission, questioning people about their ignorance and promoting virtue, was

incompatible with a political career. In *The Apology*, he explains that he never sought public office because he feared compromising his philosophical mission.

Nevertheless, Socrates firmly believed that only those who possess virtue and knowledge are capable of ruling wisely. For him, moral and intellectual competence must be the basis of political power, not birth or wealth. In Plato's *Republic*, which probably reflects some of Socrates' ideas, it is proposed that "philosopher-kings", that is, the wisest and most virtuous individuals, should rule the city. This vision corresponds to a form of intellectual aristocracy, where power is entrusted to an elite based on virtue and knowledge, rather than to the popular masses or a hereditary class. Socrates strongly criticized the sophists, who taught the art of rhetorical persuasion without caring about truth or virtue. He saw in this practice a threat to democracy, because it allowed speakers to manipulate the masses without genuine competence.

Although Socrates criticized Athenian democracy, he did not explicitly defend a traditional aristocracy based on birth or wealth. He also rejected tyrannies and oligarchies, which favored personal or economic power. Rather than supporting an existing political system, Socrates seems to aspire to an ideal society where rulers would be chosen solely on the basis of their virtue and wisdom. This vision is closer to a philosophical utopia than to a concrete political regime.

Thus, Socrates cannot simply be described as a democrat or an aristocrat in the strict sense. However, his sharp criticisms of Athenian democracy and his insistence on the importance of virtue and knowledge for governing suggest that he leaned more toward a form of intellectual aristocracy. But he valued a moral and rational elite rather than a hereditary or economic one.

**The Violence of Socrates**

From the standpoint of egalitarianism and democracy, Socrates can be perceived as violent because his method relies on a form of intellectual superiority and the hierarchization of knowledge. In a democracy where the ideal is that each citizen has equal access to information and the same right to speak, Socrates, by posing as a superior guide of reasoning, seems to establish a distinction between those who hold truth and those who are deprived of it. By constantly questioning the ideas of his interlocutors, he creates a dynamic of asymmetrical power, where some individuals are placed in a position of intellectual vulnerability and others are given greater power, particularly himself. For an egalitarian, this hierarchy between the wise and the disciple may be perceived as contrary to the democratic principles of autonomy and equality of voices. Moreover, the Socratic method, which relies on intellectual humiliation and the deconstruction of received ideas, can be seen as a form of psychological violence, as it denies the legitimacy of individuals' opinions and perspectives. Socrates, as a dominant intellectual figure, seems to refuse the idea that all citizens can have valid knowledge, which contradicts the ideal of an inclusive democracy where every voice has its place and holds equivalent legitimacy. Nevertheless, one cannot say that Socrates or his disciples sought to overthrow democracy. Socrates himself rather criticized certain democratic practices, but never sought to replace democracy with another regime. His disciples, particularly Plato, developed political ideas that went beyond democracy, with the concept of the philosopher-king, but this does not mean that they sought to overthrow the democratic order in a direct or violent way.

## DOGMATISM AND IDEOLOGICAL CONVICTIONS

Dogmatism and ideological convictions, whether religious, political, or philosophical, could criticize Socrates on several points. These criticisms rest mainly on the fact that Socrates adopts a posture of constant questioning and the pursuit of truth, which may be perceived as a challenge to established certainties, fixed doctrines, or closed systems of belief.

Socrates affirms that he knows nothing with certainty and considers that the quest for truth requires constant questioning. He privileges inquiry and critical examination rather than adherence to pre-established truths. Dogmatism criticizes this approach by affirming that certain truths are absolute and must be accepted without questioning. For a dogmatist, Socrates sows doubt and uncertainty where there should be unshakable certainties, necessary foundations for existence and for life in society. For example, a religious person might criticize Socrates for his interrogative method, which risks undermining faith in sacred doctrines or sacred dogmas. Ideological convictions often reproach Socrates for relativizing moral or political truths, which could lead to a loss of bearings in society by destabilizing the foundations of social order through the questioning of laws or traditions. This is in fact one of the reasons cited for his condemnation to death, as he was accused precisely of corrupting the youth and threatening the gods of the city by introducing new divinities and systematically instilling doubt.

Moreover, Socrates often questioned figures of authority, politicians, sophists, or priests, to test their wisdom and reveal their ignorance. In doing so, he showed that those who hold power or supposedly superior knowledge are not always as competent as they claim to be, once again shaking social order.

Religious, political, or ideological dogmatisms saw in this approach a direct threat against established authorities. By challenging elites or official doctrines, Socrates is perceived as a disturber.

Dogmatists may also reproach Socrates for valuing personal reflection over respect for laws and traditions. Although Socrates claimed to respect the laws of Athens, his critical attitude was perceived as a form of intellectual disobedience through a mindset that remained permanently open and questioning.

Dogmatisms and ideologies reproach Socrates for never arriving at definitive conclusions, which can be seen as a form of excessive skepticism or intellectual instability. One may even criticize Socrates for never having formulated a clear doctrine or a fixed philosophical system, unlike Plato or Aristotle. By encouraging permanent questioning, Socrates could be accused of creating moral or intellectual paralysis, where individuals hesitate to act for lack of certainties. The supporter of a political ideology might reproach Socrates for delaying the concrete application of solutions by favoring an endless examination of problems.

Socrates emphasized the individual responsibility of each person to examine their own life and to seek truth. He encouraged autonomous reflection rather than passive acceptance of collective beliefs. Supporters of collectivist ideologies see in this approach a threat to common values and social solidarities. By encouraging each person to think for themselves, Socrates could weaken social bonds based on shared beliefs, for example by questioning customs, principles, and laws. The Socratic approach is often perceived as too individualistic, which could be seen as incompatible with ideological, moral, political, or religious systems that value submission to rules. Socrates may thus

be accused of promoting intellectual chaos, or even skepticism or immorality, by encouraging each individual to follow their own reason.

Thus, dogmatism and ideological convictions reproach Socrates for his refusal of absolute truths, his subversion of established authorities, his intellectual instability, and his threat to collective values. Where Socrates values critical questioning and the personal search for truth, dogmatisms and ideologies defend fixed certainties, established hierarchies, and collective solidarities. However, this subversion is also what gives his method its strength, for it invites constant reflection and the questioning of illusions or dogmas.

**The Violence of Socrates**

From the standpoint of dogmatism and ideological convictions, Socrates can be perceived as violent because he radically and systematically challenges the certainties and convictions of his interlocutors. By pushing them to expose their ideas and confront them with contradiction, he creates a form of intellectual destabilization that can be experienced as psychological violence for those deeply attached to their beliefs. For an individual with firm and dogmatic convictions, the Socratic method appears as a brutal stripping away of his ideological foundations, forcing him to face existential uncertainty.

Socrates, by constantly demanding the definition of concepts and highlighting contradictions in reasoning, can be seen as someone who denies the legitimacy of established systems of thinking and deeply rooted values. Moreover, his method can make the interlocutor vulnerable by exposing intellectual weaknesses, which creates a form of moral violence. Thus, for those who seek to preserve their ideological convictions without questioning, the Socratic method is perceived as an assault on their worldview, a form of intellectual intimidation that deprives the individual of his ideological grounding.

## SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION

Spirituality and religion, although they sometimes share points in common with the Socratic approach, such as the quest for truth or meaning, often oppose it on fundamental aspects. These divergences stem from their differing conceptions of truth, morality, authority, and the relationship to the absolute.

For Socrates, truth is accessible through rational reflection and critical dialogue. He believes that each individual can discover truth by examining their own ideas and contradictions. Spiritualities and religions often rest on truths revealed by a divine or transcendental authority. These truths are not accessible through reason alone, but through faith or spiritual experience. In religious traditions such as Christianity or Islam, divine truth is considered superior to any human quest for knowledge. Spirituality and religion criticize Socrates for rejecting revealed truths and insisting on human reason. For them, absolute truth exceeds the capacities of individual reason. A believer might accuse Socrates of scorning the divine dimension of truth by reducing it to a mere rational construct, and of arrogance or hubris.

Socrates defends a morality based on reason and virtue, affirming that knowledge of the good necessarily leads to acting according to that good, an intellectualism so radical that few later philosophers followed it. Morality is universal and accessible through reflection, though the process of reflection is infinite. Spiritualities and religions propose a morality based on divine commandments or transcendent principles, clearly defined. Good and evil are not defined by human reason but by a higher authority. Moral laws are often perceived as immutable divine or transcendent prescriptions.

Spirituality and religion criticize Socrates for his moral autonomy, perceived as a form of human pretension to judge what is good or evil without reference to God or the divine. A religious person might see in the Socratic approach a denial of submission to a higher divine will, without recognizing the necessity of "grace". This may involve the need for external intervention, as in Mahāyāna Buddhism where bodhisattvas play a crucial role: they are not only models of inspiration but also active guides who help practitioners on their path to awakening. Socrates encourages the critical questioning of all beliefs and doctrines, including those imposed by religious or political authorities. He rejects any authority that cannot be rationally justified. Spiritualities and religions value respect and submission to sacred doctrines or figures of religious authority. Questioning these doctrines is generally perceived as transgression. In certain religious traditions, doubting sacred texts or dogmas is considered an act of blasphemy. Spirituality and religion criticize Socrates for his insistence on questioning established beliefs. For them, this attitude can threaten the social and spiritual order founded on faith.

Socrates adopts a posture of intellectual humility, affirming that he knows nothing with certainty. His method rests on doubt and critical examination to gradually approach truth. Spiritualities and religions offer transcendent certainties about the nature of existence, God, and the afterlife. They reject doubt as weakness or as a threat to faith. Spirituality and religion criticize Socrates for his insistence on methodical doubt, perceived as a denial of established spiritual truths. For them, this rational quest risks leading to agnosticism or atheism.

For Socrates, the purpose of life is the quest for truth and the realization of virtue. He values the contemplative and philosophical life as superior to any

other aspiration. Spiritualities and religions place spiritual salvation or communion with the divine at the center of human life. The philosophical quest is often seen as secondary compared to this transcendent purpose. For example, in Hinduism or Buddhism, liberation (moksha or nirvana) is viewed as the ultimate goal of existence.

These two visions are incompatible: where Socrates seeks to transcend material desires to reach rational ideals, spirituality and religion aim for union with the divine or spiritual transformation. Thus, a religious person could perceive the Socratic quest for truth as a distraction from the spiritual urgency of salvation. These divergences show that spirituality and religion represent a transcendent and dogmatic vision, whereas Socrates embodies a rational and critical approach to truth and morality.

Nevertheless, piety is a central theme in Socratic thought. However, his conception of piety differs profoundly from that generally defended by the religious or spiritual traditions of his time and ours. For Socrates, piety is not simply blind obedience to the gods or to religious rituals. It consists rather in acting according to justice and the good, because he believes that the gods themselves desire what is good and just. In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates questions Euthyphro on the nature of piety. He refuses to accept that piety is defined as "what pleases the gods", since this does not guarantee that such actions are morally just. He insists that piety must be rationally justified. He rejects any form of religious devotion based solely on tradition, superstition, or fear of the gods. He implicitly criticizes those who practice religious rituals without understanding their moral or philosophical meaning. For him, piety is a virtue among others, linked to justice, courage, and wisdom. It is not an end in itself, but an expression of the overall virtue of an individual. In *The Apology*, he

affirms that his philosophical mission, questioning people about their ignorance, is itself a form of piety, because it aims to improve souls and respect the divine will.

In traditional Greek religion, piety was often understood as submission to the gods and strict observance of rites, sacrifices, and prayers. These practices aimed to appease the gods and obtain their favor. The religious traditions of the time did not necessarily require a rational understanding of pious practices. What mattered was conformity to established religious norms. Socrates criticizes this approach, affirming that it is superficial and irrational. He rejects the idea that piety could be reduced to outward acts, such as sacrifices, without a deeper understanding of their moral significance. In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates shows that following the gods without reflection can lead to contradictions or injustices.

For Socrates, piety is inseparable from the rational pursuit of good and justice. He sees the gods as benevolent figures who desire the good of humans, not as capricious beings demanding blind sacrifices. He affirms that the gods cannot be in disagreement about what is just, because justice is universal and rational. One sees that reason takes precedence for him over divinity. By contrast, traditional religion emphasized submission to the gods and the necessity of respecting their will, or transcendent truths, even if these seemed arbitrary or incomprehensible to humans. By questioning traditional practices and proposing a rational interpretation of piety, he was accused of introducing new divinities and of corrupting the youth. In *The Apology*, he explains that his *daimon*, an inner voice that guides him, is not a traditional god but a manifestation of his moral conscience. This divergence illustrates a central tension between the Socratic approach, which seeks to rationalize and moralize

piety, and traditional religious conceptions, which favor submission and conformity to established practices. Thus, Socrates is critical of the principle of revelation insofar as he refuses to accept any truth imposed without rational justification. He emphasizes the necessity of critical examination and dialectic to access knowledge. However, he does not totally exclude a divine or transcendent dimension, which he considers complementary to human reason, but never substitutive.

**The Violence of Socrates**

From the point of view of spirituality and religion, Socrates can be perceived as violent because he questions the religious and spiritual foundations of his contemporaries, notably through his criticism of Athens' traditional gods. By presenting himself as guided by a "demon", a sort of personal divine inspiration, he diverts established religious beliefs, which can be seen as an act of defiance toward the religious and spiritual order of the city. Socrates insists on the primacy of human reason and self-examination, which can be perceived as a form of desacralization of traditional religious practices; he rejects "revelation" as a privileged access to reality. He questions the role of divinity in morality and human conduct, refusing the idea that religion could be an absolute and unquestionable truth, which can be perceived as a symbolic violence against people's religious beliefs. Moreover, his method of constant questioning and Socratic irony can disarm spiritually engaged individuals, imposing on them an uncertainty that undermines their faith and their understanding of the divine. Thus, for deeply religious individuals, the Socratic approach can be seen as a blow to their spiritual stability.

Modern meditation, as practiced in spiritual, psychological, or wellness contexts, for example, mindfulness meditation, opposes the Socratic approach on several fundamental points. These divergences stem from their different approaches to the quest for truth, the relationship to oneself, and the method used to attain knowledge or well-being.

The Socratic method rests on critical dialogue and rational questioning. Socrates engages his interlocutors in discussions to reveal their contradictions and clarify their ideas. Modern meditation favors inner silence and non-judgmental observation of thoughts, emotions, and sensations. It encourages a form of passive introspection rather than critical analysis. For example, mindfulness invites one to observe thoughts without seeking to interpret or question them. Modern meditation could criticize the Socratic approach for its insistence on critical dialogue, perceived as a potential source of mental tension or intellectual agitation. For a meditator, this approach might seem too analytical and detached from direct experience. A practitioner of meditation might see in the Socratic dialectic a kind of intellectual overstimulation that prevents access to inner peace.

For Socrates, the purpose of life is the quest for truth and the realization of virtue through reason. He values rational understanding as the means of attaining wisdom and justice. Modern meditation aims mainly at emotional well-being and stress reduction. It emphasizes acceptance of present experiences, without necessarily seeking to understand their origin or meaning. For example, mindfulness practice helps manage anxiety and cultivate serenity, independently of any search for abstract truth. Modern meditation implicitly criticizes Socrates for his insistence on intellectual analysis, perceived as a

distraction from immediate experience and emotional needs. A meditator might consider the Socratic quest for truth secondary compared to mental and emotional calm.

Socrates encourages constant self-questioning and examination of one's beliefs. He considers that recognizing one's ignorance is the first step toward wisdom. Modern meditation promotes an attitude of non-judgment and self-acceptance. It encourages welcoming one's thoughts, emotions, and imperfections without analyzing or criticizing them. Mindfulness teaches observing thoughts without labeling them good or bad, which fosters a more peaceful relationship with oneself. Modern meditation could criticize Socrates for his insistence on revealing the ignorance and contradictions of his interlocutors, perceived as a potential source of psychological suffering. For a meditator, this approach might seem needlessly conflictual. A practitioner of meditation might prefer a gentle and compassionate approach, rather than being confronted with intellectual or moral limits. If one begins to judge their thoughts, one might fall into destructive guilt; instead, they prefer not to judge and to let them pass.

Socrates values reason as the principal tool for understanding the world and oneself. He rejects purely intuitive or emotional approaches, considering that they cannot lead to true knowledge. Modern meditation emphasizes direct experience and intuition, valuing immediate perceptions over rational analyses. It considers that truth can be apprehended without passing through critical reflection. Practitioners of meditation often affirm that mental clarity and wisdom emerge naturally from attentive and silent observation.

Modern meditation criticizes Socrates for his insistence on reason, perceived as a form of intellectual control that could mask deeper truths accessible through

intuition or direct experience. A meditator might accuse Socrates of neglecting the emotional and bodily dimensions of human experience by privileging a purely rational approach.

The Socratic approach is oriented toward the future, as it seeks to attain universal truth, enduring wisdom, and thus a form of self-transcendence. It presupposes continuous effort to progress toward these goals. For example, Socrates views philosophy as a preparation for death and for an eternally virtuous life in the *Phaedo*. Modern meditation insists on the importance of the present moment and encourages living fully in the here and now without projecting into the future or ruminating on the past. Mindfulness teaches one to remain anchored in the here and now, without worrying about long-term results. Modern meditation criticizes Socrates for his orientation toward future or universal truths, perceived as a distraction from the importance of fully living the present. A meditator might perceive the Socratic quest for truth as an escape from immediate and concrete reality.

These divergences show that modern meditation represents an experiential and emotional approach, whereas Socrates embodies a rational and analytical approach to truth and well-being.

Nevertheless, Socrates is sometimes described as practicing a form of meditation or silent reflection, notably when he remained motionless for hours, absorbed in his thoughts. This dimension of his personality could seem to bring his approach closer to modern meditation, particularly in its introspective and contemplative aspect. However, it is important to distinguish this Socratic practice from modern meditation as conceived today. In *The Symposium*, Alcibiades recounts how Socrates remained immobile for an entire day and night, absorbed in his thoughts, before resuming his daily activities.

These moments of silence are interpreted as phases of deep reflection or philosophical contemplation. But unlike modern meditation, which aims mainly at emotional well-being and mental calm, Socrates' "meditation" had a clearly intellectual purpose. He used these moments of silence to reflect on fundamental questions of truth, virtue, and justice. These periods of immobility were not meant to soothe his mind, but to deepen his rational understanding of the world. Socrates' "meditation" was not passive or non-judgmental, as in mindfulness. It involved intense mental activity, where he examined, analyzed, and questioned his own ideas and universal concepts. Whereas a mindfulness practitioner observes their thoughts as passing clouds, without seeking to understand or modify them. Modern meditation aims mainly at emotional well-being and stress reduction. It seeks to calm the mind by cultivating an attitude of acceptance and non-resistance. For example, conscious breathing practices or body scans aim to soothe anxiety and strengthen inner serenity. Unlike Socrates, modern meditation does not seek to resolve philosophical problems or attain universal truth. It focuses on immediate experience and emotional regulation. A modern meditator does not spend hours reflecting on the nature of virtue or justice, but rather observing bodily sensations or calming the mind.

Despite their differences, Socrates' "meditation" and modern meditation share some similarities. Both involve periods of physical stillness, which foster deep concentration. Both involve a form of introspection, though their objectives differ. Whether through rational reflection (Socrates) or non-judgmental observation (modern meditation), both approaches seek to clarify the mind, directly for the former, indirectly for the latter. The two approaches are not necessarily contradictory. For people easily troubled by the agitation of their emotions, a moment of mindfulness meditation can be a good preparation before a philosophical meditation, although it does not automatically lead to it.

Thus, although Socrates and modern meditation share a certain contemplative dimension, their approaches differ radically in their goals and methods: an intellectual and philosophical quest for one, emotional and sensory experience for the other.

**The Violence of Socrates**

From the perspective of modern meditation, Socrates can be perceived as violent due to his method of incessant questioning, which incites constant intellectual examination instead of fostering the mental rest and peaceful self-acceptance promoted by meditation. Modern meditation emphasizes presence, letting go, and inner calm, whereas Socrates encourages constant questioning and struggle against ignorance, which can lead to mental tension rather than serenity. His method, which pushes individuals to face their internal contradictions and weaknesses, can create a form of stress or psychological agitation, where meditation seeks to soothe the mind. Socrates, through his insistence on dissolving intellectual illusions, can be seen as someone who creates inner discomfort by forcing individuals to question their certainties and feel dissatisfied with their current state. For practitioners of meditation, who seek to cultivate internal balance without judgment, the Socratic method appears as a form of mental violence, since it contradicts the aspiration to self-acceptance and inner harmony, a criticism which, of course, could be described as superficial, egocentric, illusory, or complacent.

## ACADEMIC PHILOSOPHY

Academic philosophy, as practiced in modern university institutions, stands in opposition to the Socratic approach in several respects, even though it is

historically inspired by Socrates and his successors. These divergences stem from differences in methods, objectives, and contexts between contemporary philosophy and Socrates' original approach.

The Socratic method rests on critical dialogue and direct questioning. Socrates engages his interlocutors in informal discussions to reveal their ignorance and clarify their ideas. Modern academic philosophy favors a formal and systematic approach, based on logical arguments, precise concepts, and often technical tools such as formal logic or analytic philosophy, and works must be justified by established references, frequently accompanied by specialized language. Academic philosophy criticizes the Socratic method for its informality and imprecision, which it perceives as insufficient for treating complex questions with rigor.

For Socrates, philosophy is above all a personal quest aimed at improving the soul and living virtuously. He considers that self-understanding and truth lead to a better life. Modern academic philosophy seeks primarily to produce knowledge that enriches the global philosophical corpus. It is less centered on personal transformation than on intellectual contribution. Modern philosophical articles are often written to be published in scholarly journals, thus contributing to an erudite debate rather than to individual introspection. Academic philosophy implicitly criticizes Socrates for his insistence on personal transformation, seen as subjective and difficult to measure in an academic framework.

Socrates practiced philosophy in public spaces, engaging with ordinary citizens, politicians, sophists, or artisans. His approach was accessible and oriented toward concrete questions of daily life. Modern academic philosophy takes place mainly in universities or specialized circles. It is often detached from the

immediate concerns of ordinary citizens and addressed to a restricted audience of specialists, using technical jargon and complex references. Academic philosophy criticizes Socrates for his public engagement, perceived as too imprecise or scattered to meet the standards of modern academic research. An academic philosopher might view the Socratic approach as a form of excessive popularization, incompatible with the rigor expected in an institutional framework.

Academic philosophy also criticizes Socrates for his insistence on universal truths, perceived as naïve or dogmatic in the face of the diversity of human perspectives. For example, a relativist philosopher might accuse Socrates of imposing a single vision of truth while ignoring cultural differences and power dynamics.

For Socrates, philosophy is not only an intellectual activity but a way of life. He put his ideas into practice in his daily life, even defying the authorities when he deemed it necessary. Modern academic philosophy tends to separate theory from praxis. It is often perceived as an abstract activity, detached from concrete social engagements. For example, an academic philosopher may write articles on social justice without necessarily becoming engaged in political or social action.

These divergences show that academic philosophy represents an institutional and specialized approach, whereas Socrates embodies a living and engaged philosophy, rooted in the concrete concerns of human life.

**The Violence of Socrates**

From the perspective of academic philosophy, Socrates can be perceived as violent because of his deconstructive and unsystematic method, which runs

counter to the standards of rigor and methodological precision generally valued in academic institutions. His dialectical method relies on continuous questioning, the dismantling of preconceived ideas, and constant challenge, which can be perceived as a form of intellectual violence. Unlike more structured and theoretical philosophical approaches that aim to establish coherent systems of thinking, Socrates seems to destabilize his interlocutors without offering definitive answers, leaving them in a state of uncertainty. This absence of clear conclusions can be experienced as unsettling for academics who favor stable rationality and the elaboration of robust theories. Moreover, his way of presenting himself as humble and ignorant while asking penetrating questions could be perceived as an act of intellectual domination, creating an imbalance in academic power relations. Thus, by shaking certainties, refusing to provide firm answers, and ignoring or criticizing scholarly frameworks, Socrates can be seen as a subversive and potentially violent figure within the academic context.

Furthermore, the direct interpellation of the interlocutor, which is a characteristic of the Socratic method, can be perceived as a form of intellectual violence, especially in an academic context where respect for conventions of politeness and codes of communication is essential. Socrates, by posing sometimes very uncomfortable and direct questions without taking into account emotional reservations or personal boundaries, goes against the more moderate and respectful practices expected in academic discussions. This way of challenging one's interlocutor, this convocation of the subject, sometimes insistently and without concessions, can be seen as disrespectful, even as a form of verbal violence, because it forces the public exposure of weaknesses and contradictions. In an academic setting, this lack of diplomacy and restraint is perceived as inappropriate, since it undermines the formal rules in force.

Psychologism is, at its core, a philosophical doctrine which holds that the laws of logic, the principles of knowledge, or philosophical concepts in general can be reduced to psychological processes, as in John Stuart Mill, a proponent of radical empiricism. This approach considers logical, mathematical, or even moral truths not as objective or universal realities but as mental constructions dependent on the mechanisms of the human mind, generalizations drawn from individuals' subjective experience. From this perspective, logical rules are merely reflections of mental habits, associations of ideas, or human cognitive processes. By reducing the laws of logic to psychological phenomena, psychologism tends toward relativism. The latter suggests that logical truths are not absolute but vary according to individuals' psychological or cultural conditions. Other philosophers, such as Husserl, criticized psychologism by showing that reducing logic to psychology makes it impossible to distinguish between what is objectively true and what is merely subjectively perceived as such. If logic were subordinated to psychology, it would mean that rational truths could change according to the psychological developments of human beings. Such a position would undermine the very foundations of science and philosophy. Although attractive at first glance, psychologism has been criticized for its confusion between the thinking subject, psychology, and the object of thinking, logical and rational laws.

Now, the Socratic method rests on the idea that each individual already possesses within them a spark of truth that can be brought forth through dialogue and questioning. Psychologism could therefore object that this method does not uncover universal truths but merely projects individual or

collective mental patterns. What Socrates considers rational truth would, in reality, be a product of social, emotional, or cognitive conditioning.

Psychologism could also criticize Socrates for his optimism concerning the capacities of human reason. In reality, human mental processes are often biased by factors such as passions, desires, or prejudices. These elements, although recognized by Socrates in certain dialogues, are not sufficiently taken into account in his method. For example, when Socrates asserts that “no one does wrong voluntarily”, psychologism could respond that this idea ignores the irrational dimensions of the human mind, such as instinctive drives or internal conflicts. Thus, the appeal to common reason would not be a reliable basis for attaining truth, since it is subject to the same limitations as any other human construction. Psychologism could also interpret Socratic irony as a form of psychological manipulation rather than a neutral tool for seeking truth. It would exploit the psychological weaknesses of interlocutors, their pride or their desire to be right, to lead them to adopt certain conclusions. This approach would then be less a quest for truth than a rhetorical strategy aimed at reinforcing Socrates’ position, a way of playing with the mechanisms of the human mind rather than seeking objective truth.

Psychologism insists that each individual is marked by particular experiences, emotions, and contexts that make true universality of reason impossible. What Socrates considers universal truths would in reality be constructions specific to an era, a culture, or a social group. When Socrates defends the idea that “the good is identical for all men”, psychologism responds that this conception of the good is relative and dependent on the psychological and social conditions of those who formulate it. Thus, his universalism is incompatible with the diversity of human experiences and contexts.

But there is also a psychologizing trend in contemporary society which one might call an “ambient psychologism”. This phenomenon manifests as a general tendency to interpret behaviors, ideas, and even philosophical truths through the prism of individual or collective psychological processes. For example, it is common to hear expressions like “For me…” or “It depends on each person’s point of view”. Such formulations reflect a tendency to minimize the universal scope of an idea in favor of a strictly personal perspective. They reveal an unconscious strategy to minimize intellectual engagement by retreating into subjectivity. By saying “For me…”, the interlocutor can avoid confronting their ideas with logic or common sense, thereby protecting themselves from the trial that the Socratic dialogue represents. This kind of behavior can be seen as a tacit withdrawal: rather than pursuing the debate, the interlocutor retreats into a personal position, inaccessible to criticism. An attitude that may be described as a place of “non-thinking” that inhibits or paralyzes the mind.

This generalized relativism shows how “truths” are perceived as subjective opinions rather than as universal principles. Common sense, or shared reason, is thereby devalued. People tend to reject what is considered “obvious” or “common” in favor of more individualized or complex perspectives, using the fallacious argument of “not always” or “not necessarily”, which would force common sense to be an absolute without possible exceptions. This mistrust of reason can be interpreted as a form of psychologism, where collective norms are perceived as inferior to individual intuitions.

In contemporary society, emotions and passions play a central role in how individuals perceive and interpret the world. Discourses based on emotional authenticity or subjective experience are often valorized, sometimes to the

detriment of rationality. This primacy given to emotions over reason is a key feature of ambient psychologism. It also manifests as an excessive valorization of individualism. People often use strategies to minimize their statements, “I was just saying that casually!”, in order to avoid any challenge to their identity. This attitude “lets” individuals shield themselves behind subjective experience, refusing to confront their ideas with a common norm, with any form of rationality. Strangely, such discourse can lead a person to reject common sense, deemed banal, in favor of another mode of thinking, perceived as deeper because more personal. Yet this ambient psychologism is strongly present in contemporary society, influencing the way we perceive and interpret the world.

Ambient psychologism emphasizes support, consolation, or pity. It effectively reduces thinking to a symptom, since every opinion or behavior is traced back to individual psychic mechanisms, traumas, wounds, emotional needs. The universalizable dimension of thinking, its rational scope, is thus evacuated. The question is no longer: “Is it true or not?” but “What do you feel?” or “What do you need?” This kills the possibility of reasoned disagreement: it is no longer a matter of seeking to understand or criticize an idea but of sympathizing or soothing a pain. Psychologism confuses, for example, suffering and injustice, leading to a confusion between “to suffer” and “to suffer an injustice”. It is too quickly assumed that what hurts is unjust, and that what soothes is good. Yet it is possible that a just discourse wounds, that a true statement disturbs, and that an “empathetic” care perpetuates servitude. Psychologism tends to moralize suffering, to make it unquestionable. But not everything that causes suffering is unjust, and it can make sense or even be indispensable, as in any process of growth. And not everything that soothes is necessarily good. Consequently, psychologism encourages narcissistic complacency. Since the

subject is sacralized in their experience, emotions, and feelings, they are no longer asked to surpass themselves; they are reassured. Psychologism is then a comforting mirror: you are normal, you are valid, everything you feel is legitimate. Whereas philosophy demands. It requires an effort of coherence, of transcendence, of confrontation. Thus Socrates did not flatter. He disturbed, questioned, and undermined certainties.

**The Violence of Socrates**

Ambient psychologism, which privileges the analysis of individuals through their emotions and subjective experiences, could perceive the Socratic practice as violent for several reasons. Indeed, Socrates, through his rigorous questioning method and his incessant search for contradictions, destabilizes the certainties of his interlocutors, disrupts their habits, which can be experienced as a form of psychological aggression. Individuals are pushed to confront their ideas and to question deeply rooted patterns, often without the possibility of comfort or emotional protection. In a context where empathy, benevolence, and recognition of personal emotions are prioritized, the Socratic method seems harsh. It exposes the intellectual fragilities and contradictions of individuals without regard for their vulnerability. Psychologism emphasizes protecting the individual in their affective dimension, and could thus consider this practice as a form of violence, since it leaves no space for the person to express their emotions and beliefs, and might be perceived as an attempt to reduce the other to a mere object of rational criticism.

Moreover, the fact that Socrates pushes his interlocutors to admit ignorance and to recognize their weaknesses can be perceived as a form of devaluation or humiliation. In a culture where self-esteem and psychological validation are paramount, the Socratic practice can be experienced as an affront, an attack on

the individual's self-image. His irony would be interpreted as a form of manipulation aimed at publicly humiliating his interlocutors, creating a psychologically hostile environment incompatible with today's ideal of benevolent communication and empathetic exchange. The Socratic method, with its incessant questions, is perceived as an intrusion into the interlocutor's mental and emotional space, a form of violence where Socrates relentlessly pushes the other to doubt themselves. Ambient psychologism values emotional and subjective dimensions, whereas Socrates tends to minimize these aspects in favor of reason, which comes across as a violent negation of essential dimensions of human existence. By confronting his interlocutors with their contradictions, Socrates compels them to let go of their beliefs or opinions, which is seen as an assault on their identity, since those beliefs are often deeply rooted.

Ambient psychologism rejects universal norms imposed by logic or common sense. Socrates, by contrast, imposes a strict rational framework, which is felt as a violence done to individual particularities. Psychologism, which values empathetic understanding and respect for individuality, can therefore consider the Socratic method as an intrusive process that violates individuals' integrity by brutally confronting them with their contradictions, without genuine support. The Socratic *elenchos*, which often leads to aporia and confusion, would be considered potentially traumatic, creating a state of cognitive destabilization without offering the "safe space" so highly valued today. This practice can thus be perceived as violent, since it does not allow interlocutors to withdraw or protect themselves in a private space where their emotions could be preserved. This method, deliberately ignoring the emotional distress signals of his interlocutors in order to pursue rational examination, would be seen as insensitive to psychological needs. Contemporary psychologism, which

privileges emotional comfort and self-affirmation, would consider the dialogical asymmetry established by Socrates as a form of toxic psychological domination. In this contemporary, supposedly “holistic” framework, which seeks to apprehend the individual in their entirety, the Socratic approach appears reductive and inattentive to the affective and emotional dimensions of human existence.