



**The dialectical method in Socrates' awareness of ignorance:
a communication model?**

The purpose of this lecture is an attempt to understand the connections between Socrates' dialectical method and the way we communicate in our modern world. Is there a possible bridge between the ancient dialectical technique and the way we come to terms "for all practical purposes" with our interlocutors during whatever exchange of opinions or even during a real *clash*, sort of dialectical battle between two or more contenders?

Dialectic is the "practice of disciplined conversation": thus we can view in Socrates' style of "conversation" a certain amount of elements which can be seen as strategic points enabling us to defend our *stances* and also helping others to express and clarify their chain of thoughts. Socrates acts mainly using *Irony*. It permits him to *cast in doubt* the counterpart's position: this happens as soon as Socrates, conversely, starts extolling, admiring and praising the ability and the thoroughness of speech displayed by his temporary interlocutor.

This is a very clever move: the humble questions raised by Socrates place the interlocutor momentarily in an upper position: he becomes indeed recognized as competent and gifted, as someone who is at ease with complex and *keen rationales*. Socrates applies here his *maieutical method*: he lets the truth just unconsciously come out from the very inner knowledge of the speakers. Who knows about his not knowing indeed can discover that he knows. Knowledge lies at the very bottom of our soul: we just need someone who is able to cut it *loose* from its inner *ties* and who gently *coaxes* the evidence of a deepest knowledge out of somebody's mind.

So, when Socrates starts to gradually *tackle* and solve the doubts he has been raising by means of displaying a logical chain of conclusions, compelling questions, consequences and deductions presented step by step, something suddenly becomes self-evident: the interlocutor's knowledge and *cleverness* show themselves as completely inconsistent and full of *flaws and cracks*. Socrates' *practice of confutation* point by point, down to the slightest details of a concept, lets the counterpart to gradually *draw back* from discussion: Socrates' *disguised* ignorance turns out now to shining in a brilliant way, which is full of *wisdom* and logic.

The contrary applies for the inconsistent statements of his competitor who simply gets lost by arguing into *quibbles*, paradoxes and contradictions: he not rarely *steps out* of the competitions or simply *hushes*, almost feeling confused and completely unable to get out of the *pitfalls* of the logical thinking displayed by Socrates.

Socrates, then, comes to the *gist* of every argument by means of asking to the speaker the very "definition" of the object *at stake*. This allows him to "deconstruct" the concept, showing the *shortcomings* of rough and inconsistent attempts to *bind* it to *contingency*, just *framing* it without previously making sense of all its implications and consequences. Concepts like Justice, Virtue, Beauty or Good can be defined only when one doesn't try to simply list different features pertaining to the concept but if one succeeds in reaching the very deepest core of a universal definition which is independent from every contingency and empirical object.

All these characteristics are to be considered as highly useful ones when we happen to get occasionally involved into discussions and verbal "fights": we can manage to maintain control of a discussion by strategically adopting patience, awareness of our position toward our counterpart, a humble attitude of softly asking one's opinion instead of *utterly* stating and proclaiming our own one, the attempt to come together to a shareable definition that can be viewed as a universal one, respecting other's time and turn takings, leaving time and not boasting about how we are familiar with the subject, showing no pride and envy for other's success, should they in their turn seem to be better than us in arguing about a certain subject.

This whole practice can be understood nowadays as an intelligent and clever way to improve one's social ability to communicate and avoid misunderstandings and failures in a discussion: it even helps others to come to the truth on their own. *Selfish* individuals rarely are able to wait, to hear, to cooperate in seeking a common solution with their counterparts. Socrates teaches us instead how to reflect together, how to discipline our mind, how to respect other's opinions even when easily showing that they cannot hold. Reading Socrates' dialogues can help us to discover the best way to become a good thinker, but even more a good citizen of our community.

***Socrates (469-399 B.C.)** Born at Athens. He gave himself to education, not indeed wanting to teach any positive doctrine, but to free men of ignorance mistaking itself for knowledge. Socrates did not seek to involve himself in the political life of Athens. As a prominent citizen he was called upon to fulfill minor political roles. In 399 B.C. Socrates was accused of "impiety", of "neglecting the Gods whom the city worships and the practice of religious novelties" and of "corruption of the young". He remained the main figure of his pupil Plato and one of the most important thinkers of Western philosophy.