I

What Is the Question?

Can I ask you a question?
— Socrates
“Psychiatry is the rape of the muse!”

The outburst jolts me from my reverie. I’m perched on a swivel stool in the middle of about forty-five people seated on filigreed wrought iron benches and chairs in the courtyard of an art deco café in San Francisco. It is a Tuesday night in midsummer and we’re about halfway through this particular weekly gathering. We’re trying to answer the question “What is insanity?”

The dialogue started out grounded in concrete examples, which quickly begged more and more questions. Was Hitler insane? Or was society itself insane at the time and did he just tap into it with cold and calculating sanity? Was Jack London insane? What about Edgar Allan Poe? And van Gogh? Was insanity a key to their genius? Is anyone who sacrifices his health for his art insane? Or is such squandering the essence of sanity? Is it sane to risk your life for something that you believe in? Or for something you don’t believe in? Is a businessman sane who works all day at a job he hates? Is a society wacky that tries to prolong perpetually the lives of the terminally ill? Is a society that does not sparingly use its natural resources off its rocker? Is it nutty to have thousands of nuclear weapons poised to be launched—an act that would obliterate the planet? How can anyone be sane in this world? Or is the universe itself insane? How is the concept of insanity related to such concepts as irrationality, eccentricity, lunacy, and craziness? Is it possible to be sane and insane at the same time? Is it impossible not to be? Is it possible to be completely sane, or completely insane? What are the criteria for determining that someone or something is insane? Is there really any such thing as insanity?

Questions, questions, questions. They disturb. They provoke. They exhilarate. They intimidate. They make you feel a little bit like you’ve at least temporarily lost your marbles. So much so that at times I’m positive that the ground is shaking and shifting under our feet. But not from an earthquake.

Welcome to Socrates Café

Even though it is the dead of summer, it is a chilly evening. No matter. The courtyard is filled. The motley group of philosophical inquirers—aging beatniks, businesspeople, students, shop workers, professors, teachers, palm readers, bureaucrats, and homeless persons, among others—are huddled in the middle of an ivy-laced garden. In a way, the gathering slightly resembles a church service—for heretics. And what connects us is a love for the question, and a passion for challenging even our most cherished assumptions.

All attention now is fastened on the tall, rail-thin man who lashed out against psychiatrists. He did so only after a psychiatrist said with an air of authority that the only antidote to insanity is psychiatric treatment. While the psychiatrist in
question seems ruffled by the disparaging remark about his profession, his critic is sitting stock-still, the picture of calm. He has deep-set blue eyes that seem to be looking inward and a gaunt face that reveals the faintest hint of a smile. His bright red hair is neatly combed straight back except for one rebellious lock dangling over his forehead. At the moment, the only sound to be heard as we look his way is the trickling water in the gargoyle fountain.

“What do you mean?” I ask the man. “How is psychiatry the rape of the muse?”

I have an inkling that he hoped his statement would have shock value and that we would let it pass, unchallenged. Not at Socrates Café. Here we subscribe to the ethos that it is not enough to have the courage of your convictions, but you must also have the courage to have your convictions challenged.

It takes him some time to fix his gaze on me. “Plato spoke of a type of divine madness which he defined as ‘possession by the Muses’,” he says at last, choosing his words carefully. “Plato said having this madness was indispensable to the production of the best poetry. But psychiatrists want to modify our behaviour; they want us to be moderate people. They want to destroy our muse.”

“I’m a psychiatric social worker,” a man quickly interjects. I expect him also to take offence at this critique of psychiatrists. But instead, with a pensive half-smile, he says, “I worry a lot about the long-range effects on people of antipsychotic medications. Just as psychiatrists try to ‘cure’ children with attention deficit disorder by giving them Ritalin, I think that drugs like Haldol and Zymexa and the old Thorazine are dispensed with alarming frequency to adults because of society’s desire to control behaviour. Moderate behaviour is the god of our mental health system. To me this is chilling.”

“Isn’t it better to be insane than to let them kill the artist in you?” the gaunt-faced man asks his unexpected ally.

“But is it a choice between moderation and sanity?” I ask. “Can’t we be a little insane, or somewhat insane, without being completely insane? In Plato’s dialogue Phaedo, Socrates says that a combination of sobriety and madness impels the soul to philosophise, and I’m wondering if the same is true with art. Can’t we temper the insanity within in a way that enables us to be even more in touch with our muse, and so be even more creative than we’d otherwise be able to be?”

But then I start to wonder if I know what I’m talking about. I seem to be the last person to know sane from insane. For a good while, I’ve been on the rather zany quest of bringing philosophy out of the universities and back “to the people”, wherever they happen to be. Almost always, I do it for free. Apparently what I am doing is seen as too new, too different, too outside the norm, too . . . crazy. So, either for free or for a pittance, I facilitate philosophical discussions, which I call Socrates Café. I go to cafés and coffeehouses and diners. I go to day care
centres, nursery schools, elementary schools, junior high and high schools, schools for special-needs children. I go to senior centres, nursing homes, assisted-living residences. I’ve been to a church, a hospice, a prison. I travewidely to engage in philosophical dialogue and help others start Socrates Cafés. I pay all expenses out of my own pocket, earning a dollar here and there by other means. I often ask myself, “Am I crazy to do this?” But that is beside the point. I do not want to profit from this. This is not about money. It is a calling.

For one thing, I don’t facilitate Socrates Café to teach others. I facilitate Socrates Café so others can teach me. The fact is that I always learn much more from the other participants than they could ever learn from me. Each gathering enables me to benefit from the perspectives of so many others. For another thing, you might even go so far as to say that this crazy quest of mine has saved my sanity. But that might be going too far. So I’ll just say this: I’m seeking Socrates.

Eventually, more hands go up around the circle. The discussion heats up, gathers a certain momentum. Then a bald, stocky man with a fedora clinched in one hand jumps to his feet. “I can speak as an expert on this subject,” he says. His remarkable bright green eyes seem to dance from one person to another. “I’ve been committed to psychiatric institutions three times since the beginning of the year. Who are they to commit me? Who are they to classify me as insane? I’m one of the sanest, smartest people I know.” He remains standing.

He seems surprised that his comment is not met with shock or derision. Instead, he is peppered with questions. People want to know his story. It seems clear that most are asking themselves, “Who better to comment with insight on insanity than a person who has been labelled insane?” I am hard pressed to think of any other setting in which a group of people, most of them total strangers, would crave hearing more from someone who’s just said he’s certifiably insane (even if, as he insists, he’s been misdiagnosed).

Then he goes on to say one of the most memorable and reasonable things I’ve ever heard: “Don Quixote was mad. But his madness was of a type that made him immortal. The Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno said Don Quixote’s legacy was . . . himself. And he wrote that ‘a man, a living, eternal man, is worth all the theories and philosophies,’ because in a sense he remains on earth ‘and lives among us, inspiring us with his spirit.’ I think that what Unamuno says of Don Quixote is even truer of Socrates. Unlike Don Quixote, Socrates apparently lived among us at one time. And he was the epitome of a rational person.”

He pauses for a moment, his head now bowed. Then he looks up at all of us and says, “Socrates left us himself. He left us his wisdom and his virtue.
And he remains among us, inspiring us with his spirit.” We look at him in wonder.

A statuesque woman with short purple hair who is wearing a purple Green Peace T-shirt eventually asks, “Was Socrates really all that sane?”

“What do you think?” I ask her.

“Well,” she replies, “when Socrates was tried and convicted of heresy for impiety and for corrupting the youth of Athens, his prosecutors hinted that if he’d agree to keep his mouth shut they wouldn’t put him to death. But Socrates said he’d rather die than quit asking questions.”

“Was it crazy of him to prefer death?” I ask.

“Socrates said that the unexamined life isn’t worth living,” she says. “So I guess for him it wasn’t crazy.”

“I think he was crazy,” says a somewhat dishevelled man in sandals, a Hawaiian shirt, and a battered bowler hat that completes a picture of sartorial strangeness. “But his brand of craziness has been the guide for civilizations whenever they try to set themselves on a road of sanity. Socrates was the quintessential social being. Wherever he went and engaged in dialogue, he tried to help people be more thoughtful and tolerant and rational. He wasn’t insane, because his decisions were conscious and rational choices within his control. Even his decision to end his life was such a choice. But by normal societal standards he was crazy – a good crazy.”

I end this evening’s discussion on insanity by saying what I typically say at the end of every Socrates Café: “It’s something to keep thinking about.”

And then… the participants clap. Are they nuts? The discussion was intense, passionate, frustrating. Emotions were highly charged. It ended with many more questions than answers. Nothing was resolved. So why clap? I don’t know, but I wind up clapping too.

### Seeking Socrates

Seeking Socrates? What in the world do I mean by that?

Here’s the short answer: For a long time, I’d had a notion that the demise of a certain type of philosophy has been to the detriment of our society. It is a type of philosophy that Socrates and other philosophers practiced in Athens in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. A type that utilised a method of philosophical inquiry that “everyman” and “everywoman” could embrace and take for his or her own, and in the process rekindle the childlike – but by no means childish – sense of wonder. A type of vibrant and relevant philosophy that quite often left curious souls with more questions than they’d had at the outset of the discussion, but at times enabled them to come up with at least tentative answers. A type
of anti-guru philosophy in which the person leading the discussion always learns much more from the other participants than they could ever learn from him. A type of philosophy that recognised that questions often reveal more about us and the world around us than answers. A type of philosophy in which questions often are the answers.

But centuries ago something happened to this type of philosophy: It disappeared, for all intents and purposes. To be sure, in the eighteenth century, Voltaire held court in the gilded and red velvet setting of his favourite Parisian café – Le Procope, where he fine-tuned his ideas about reason and the development of a natural science about man. And two centuries later, in the wake of the Nazi occupation of France, Sartre developed his philosophy of existentialism under the cut-glass art deco lamps at the Café de Flore. But these cafés were reserved for the intellectual elite, who often seemed to think they had a corner on the answers. It seems safe to say that, unlike this cabal of chatterers, Socrates didn’t think he knew the answers, or that knowledge was the rarified domain of so-called intellectuals. The one thing Socrates knew beyond a shadow of a doubt, he was fond of saying, was that he didn’t know anything beyond a shadow of a doubt. Yet Socrates, contrary to what many think, did not try to pose as the ultimate sceptic. He wasn’t trying to say that all knowledge was groundless, that we were doomed to know nothing. Rather, he was emphasizing that what he had come to know, the truths he had discovered by hard-won experience, were slippery, elusive, always tentative at best, always subject to new developments, new information, new alternatives. Every last bit of knowledge, every assumption, Socrates felt, should always be questioned, analyzed, challenged. Nothing was ever resolved once and for all.

It is with this ethos in mind that I launched Socrates Café. And the one and only firm and lasting truth that has emerged from all the Socrates Café discussions I’ve taken part in is that it is not possible to examine, scrutinise, plumb, and mine a question too thoroughly and exhaustively. There is always more to discover. That is the essence, and magic, of what I have come to call “Socratizing.”

Socrates Café does not have to be held in a café. It can take place anywhere a group of people – or a group of one – chooses to gather and inquire philosophically. It can take place around a dining room table, in a church or a community centre, on a mountaintop, in a nursing home, a hospice, a senior centre, a school, a prison.

Anywhere.

Anywhere and anytime you desire to do more than regurgitate ad
nauseam what you’ve read, or think you’ve read, about philosophers of the past who are considered by academics to be the undisputed exclusive members of the philosophical pantheon. It can take place anywhere people want to do philosophy, to inquire philosophically, themselves, whether with a group of people or alone.

To be sure, one of the most fruitful and flourishing places for Socrates Café to be held is at a café or coffeehouse. The gatherings typically start out small, but word spreads, and eventually more and more people come. People tell me quite frequently that “there’s a hunger” for this type of discussion, that people are “weary” of the “guru approach” to group discussion. I’m not so sure about this. It seems to me that the gurus are flourishing. In fact, at one coffeehouse where I facilitated Socrates Café, while our discussion was taking place out back in the garden, tarot card readers were operating a brisk trade inside the café. Some of these mystic soothsayers seem to have been none too amused by the fact that a number of their clients, who sat with us in the garden while waiting their turn at the tarot-reading table, wound up so immersed in our dialogue that they ended up passing on the opportunity to shell out money to have their future foreseen.

But over the short haul at least, tarot card readers and their ilk need not fear what I’m doing. For every client they lose, there are many more to take their place. There has been an upsurge of interest in the irrational the likes of which has not been seen since a similar fascination contributed to the demise of the short-lived “golden age of reason” of the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. Millions of people still embrace such irrational phenomena as astrology. Even military commanders and politicians – even first ladies of the United States – quite often resort to this “method” to predict whether a crucial battle or competition or significant event of some other sort will have a favourable outcome. I’d argue that this modern-day embrace of the irrational reveals that overall our civilization is hardly more rational than in the days when Roman commanders sought to predict their immediate future by examining the intestines of chickens. In a way, it is startling to me that otherwise rational people can give in so easily to the temptation to see a connection between independent phenomena that happen to coincide in time. But then I recall that even the fourth-century Greek philosopher Aristotle, one of the greatest philosophers of all time, who lived amid a resurgence of belief in supernatural phenomena, was not surprised by the citizenry’s pervasive love affair with the irrational. Based on his careful observations of human nature, Aristotle came to the conclusion that few men “can sustain the life of pure reason for more than very brief periods.”

The classical Greek scholar E.R. Dodds noted in The Greeks and
the Irrational that in the days of Aristotle, astrology and other irrational practices “fell upon the Hellenistic mind as a new disease falls upon some remote island.” Why? “For a century or more the individual had been face to face with his own intellectual freedom. And now he turned tail and bolted from the horrid prospect – better the rigid determinism of astrological Fate than that terrifying burden of daily responsibility.” The fear of and flight from freedom – which goes hand in glove with a fear of honest questioning – that is taking place today does not simply parallel what happened in ancient times. Rather, it seems to be the same fear and same flight. Today we’re not so much experiencing a return of the irrational as we are an upsurge of the irrational elements in us – such as tendencies to build belief systems on foundations of quicksand, and proclivities for destruction and self-idealization – that are part of the human fabric.

There are antidotes to the irrational. Though by no means perfect, and certainly not always skillfully handled, such antidotes can enable us to better understand ourselves, better overcome our fears, better come to grips with the irrational in us. One such antidote is the Socratic way of questioning utilised at Socrates Café. More and more people are discovering its inherent joys. They are discovering that the Socratic method can be of immense help in putting perplexities into better focus, in envisaging new directions of self-realization and human aspiration, and in pressing home the debate with the irrational.

The Socratic method of questioning aims to help people gain a better understanding of themselves and their nature and their potential for excellence. At times, it can help people make more well-informed life choices, because they now are in a better position to know themselves, to comprehend who they are and what they want. It can also enable a thoughtful person to articulate and then apply his or her unique philosophy of life. This in turn will better equip a questioning soul to engage in the endless and noble pursuit of wisdom.

No matter what question we discuss at Socrates Café, the dialogues, as Socrates says in Plato’s Republic, are “not about any chance question, but about the way one should live.” So the discussions do not just enable us to better know who we are but lead us to acquire new tactics for living and thinking so we can work toward determining, and then becoming, who we want to be. By becoming more skilled in the art of questioning, you will discover new ways to ask the questions that have vexed and perplexed you the most. In turn you will discover new and more fruitful answers. And these new answers in turn will generate a whole new host of questions. And the cycle keeps repeating itself – not in a vicious circle, but in an ever-ascending and ever-expanding spiral that gives you a continually new and replenished outlook on life.

Wherever Socrates Café is held, those who take part form a
community of philosophical inquiry. My fellow Socrates have an enduring curiosity that cannot be quenched or satisfied by the facile responses of know-it-all gurus or of psychologists who cubby-hole their existential angst into demeaning paradigms of psychological behaviour. Those who take part in Socrates Café are more concerned with formulating fruitful and reflective questions than with formulating absolute answers. Everyone is welcome and virtually all topics are valid for debate. Together, and alone, we push our thinking in surprising directions.

The possibilities are limited only by the questions your imagination and sense of wonder enable you to come up with. They don’t have to be the “big questions.” Or, at least, the big question may turn out to be something like “What are the big questions, and what makes them so?” During the hundreds of Socrates Cafés I’ve facilitated, I’ve often come to find that it’s the unexpected, the seemingly trivial or inconsequential, or the offbeat question that might well be the most worth delving into and examining for all it’s worth.

By becoming a more adept questioner, by developing a lifelong love affair with the art of questioning, I’ll wager that you’ll be able to answer more expertly than ever that question of questions, “Who am I?”

Walt Whitman, in his poem “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” wrote:

I am he who walks the States with a barb’d tongue,
questioning every one I meet.

You may not want to emulate Whitman and question everyone you meet “with a barb’d tongue,” but by becoming a better questioner, by rekindling your love of questioning, you likely will develop a better sense of who you are, who you can be, where you are, why you are, and how you might want to chart a new course for yourself. You may not discover the answer that perhaps you’d anticipated, but that’s part of the thrill of the search – the discovery of the unanticipated, the surprise of the novel.

The new course may be no more, and no less, than beginning the journey of philosophical inquiry. Almost without fail, newcomers to Socrates Café say enthusiastically after taking part in their first discussion, “I’ve been looking for something like this for so long.” They discover rather quickly that engaging in what I call the Socratic quest for honesty gives their life added depth and meaning and dimensions. Asking more and better questions will give you greater personal autonomy. You will never see the world, and your place in the world, in quite the same way again as you expand your intellectual and imaginative horizons.

Contrary to popular belief, the more questions you have, the firmer
the footing you are on. The more you know yourself. The more you can map out and set a meaningful path for your future.

This book is about my experiences seeking Socrates with people of all ages and all walks of life — and with myself. It is about rediscovering and tapping into my love of questions, questions, and more questions. It is about following the charge of the Delphic oracle: “Know thyself.” It is not a traditional self-help book, though it might prove helpful in any number of ways. I do not pretend to be a teacher, much less a guru. Or rather, if I am a teacher, then everyone else who seeks Socrates with me is a teacher too.

The many dialogues interspersed throughout this book are real enough, though they are not rendered verbatim. I never brought along a tape recorder to any of the philosophical confabs in which I took part. What’s more, the dialogues included here have had ample time to age and filter through my mind before I put pen to paper. Plato must also have added the perspectives of time and imagination when he eventually set down the “original” Socratic dialogues for posterity. In fact, he seemed to use considerable literary and philosophic license at just about every turn, in order to present even more perspectives, to make his dialogues all the more real and timeless, and to make Socrates into a figure of, some would say, mythic proportions.

As with Plato’s dialogues, there’s no getting around the fact that the dialogues in this book are more, and less, and other, than the “real live dialogues” they strive to depict. Most important, the ensuing dialogues are a seamless part of one great ongoing dialogue without beginning or end.

**We’re Socrates**

Sara Rollins arrives at the philosophical discussion group I hold each week with fourth graders at an elementary school in San Bruno, California. She is waving a somewhat crinkled piece of paper on which she’d written in pencil a single-spaced essay.

The week before, at our first gathering, the exuberant sixth grader asked me, “Who is Socrates?”

“Why don’t you tell me who Socrates is when we meet again next week,” I told her.

So now, the following week, after we are all seated in red plastic chairs arranged in a circle in the school library, I ask Sara, “So, who is Socrates?”

She reads from her paper: “Socrates was a Greek thinker and teacher. He was born in Athens about 469 B.C. and was put to his death there in 399. The only time he left Athens was to serve as a soldier in the
Peloponnesian War. He was married to Xanthippe and had two sons. For some time Socrates worked as a sculptor and stonemason. Then he grew interested in philosophy. He spent the rest of his life thinking about philosophy and discussing it with practically everyone he met. Socrates did not teach in the regular way. He held no classes and gave no lectures and wrote no books. He simply asked questions. When he got his answer he asked more. Socrates asked his questions in order to make people think about ideas they took for granted. Some men admired this very much. They became fast friends of Socrates and joined in his philosophical discussions for many years. Others thought he was simply trying to destroy old ideas about religion and morality without putting anything in their place. Some of the young men whom he knew well became traitors to their country and led a revolution that overthrew the democratic government. The Athenians rose against them and killed them. After democracy had been restored, Socrates was brought to trial. He was accused of introducing new gods to Athens and of corrupting young men’s minds. Socrates did not take these charges seriously and would not ask for mercy. So he was condemned to drinking a cup of hemlock. Many people, then and later, thought the sentence was unjust because it denied freedom of speech. Others believed that he deserved to die because his pupils nearly destroyed the Athenian state. In any case, his courage and independence have always been admired. His most famous pupil, Plato, became a great philosopher and made Socrates the chief character in most of his books.”

“Wonderful,” I say. We all clap.

Then Peter raises his hand. “I think Socrates is anyone who’s not afraid to keep asking questions even when everyone else wants to stop him,” he says.

“He’s right,” Sara says. And then the budding philosophical inquirer says, “We’re Socrates.”

**Who is Socrates?**

Sara is right, it seems to me.

In The Passion of the Western Mind, Richard Tarnas, a philosophy professor at the California Institute for Integral Studies, writes that Socrates was “imbued with a passion for intellectual honesty and moral integrity rare for his or any other age. He insistently sought answers to questions that had not before been asked, attempted to undermine conventional assumptions and beliefs to provoke more careful thinking about ethical matters, and tirelessly compelled both himself and those with whom he conversed to seek a deeper understanding of what constitutes the good life.” Unlike Tarnas, I don’t
think Socrates asked questions that had never been asked. Rather, he
developed his life to answering certain questions in a way that had rarely
before been attempted. And all those, like Sara, who in their own way
try to follow in the footsteps of Socrates in both word and deed are,
in a telling sense, Socrates.

And yet you still may feel inspired to ask, “Socrates who?” Because there is
no definitive, unshakable proof that Socrates existed. Socrates himself never
wrote down a word for posterity, as far as we know, just as Jesus never did. To
be sure, you may take Plato’s dialogues as hard evidence that this so-called real
Socrates was faithfully depicted. There is also Xenophon’s account of Socrates,
as well as a comedy by Aristophanes, and there are references to Socrates in the
works of Aristotle.

But the paradigmatic image is Plato’s portrait. However, even in Plato’s work
there’s no rock-solid evidence that the settings and characters Plato incorporated
in the dialogues with Socrates, much less the dialogues themselves, took
place in real life as Plato set them forth. Plato was a dramatist and poet
and storyteller and philosopher of the life of reason. Most likely, Plato
took considerable liberties.

Perhaps we can at least agree that Socrates is real to us through
Plato’s work, and that Plato’s dialogues were truly Socratic in style and
substance. And perhaps we can agree that the Socrates of Plato’s
dialogues stood for something special – he stood for a type of human
being who engaged in unfettered, unflinching, probingly honest
philosophical inquiry, a type of person who would rather be put to
death than have his questioning nature muzzled.

Though I do believe he existed, and though I do believe that Plato’s earliest
dialogues featuring Socrates more or less accurately represent the “historical
Socrates,” it isn’t critical to me whether he really existed, much less whether he
existed precisely as Plato depicts him in the early dialogues. He surely exists as
an idealised persona that we forever strive to realise within ourselves. The
Socrates of whom I speak is intellectual integrity personified.

If you think this notion conflicts with some of the versions of Socrates that
Plato portrayed, I do too. In some of Plato’s dialogues, the Socrates that Plato
limns seems to lead the other participants to an answer he already has in mind.
And in some instances, he seems intentionally to try to make those who claim to
know “the way, the truth, and the light” look bad or at least silly.

Just as the method that I call Socratic is ever evolving, so it is that the Socrates
I’m seeking is a Socrates still to be sought and discovered in the future,
not a personality primarily to be unearthed and dusted off from the past.
What Is the Socratic Method?

The Socratic method is a way to seek truths by your own lights.

It is a system, a spirit, a method, a type of philosophical inquiry, an intellectual technique, all rolled into one.

Socrates himself never spelled out a “method.” However, the Socratic method is named after him because Socrates, more than any other before or since, models for us philosophy practiced – philosophy as deed, as way of living, as something that any of us can do. It is an open system of philosophical inquiry that allows one to interrogate from many vantage points.

Gregory Vlastos, a Socrates scholar and professor of philosophy at Princeton, described Socrates’ method of inquiry as “among the greatest achievements of humanity.” Why? Because, he says, it makes philosophical inquiry “a common human enterprise, open to every man.” Instead of requiring allegiance to a specific philosophical viewpoint or analytic technique or specialised vocabulary, the Socratic method “calls for common sense and common speech.” And this, he says, “is as it should be, for how man should live is every man’s business.”

I think, however, that the Socratic method goes beyond Vlastos’ description. It does not merely call for common sense but examines what common sense is. The Socratic method asks: Does the common sense of our day offer us the greatest potential for self-understanding and human excellence? Or is the prevailing common sense in fact a roadblock to realizing this potential?

Vlastos goes on to say that Socratic inquiry is by no means simple, and “calls not only for the highest degree of mental alertness of which anyone is capable” but also for “moral qualities of a high order: sincerity, humility, courage.” Such qualities “protect against the possibility” that Socratic dialogue, no matter how rigorous, “would merely grind out . . . wild conclusions with irresponsible premises.” I agree, though I would replace the quality of sincerity with honesty, since one can hold a conviction sincerely without examining it, while honesty would require that one subject one’s convictions to frequent scrutiny.

A Socratic dialogue reveals how different our outlooks can be on concepts we use every day. It reveals how different our philosophies are, and often how tenable – or untenable, as the case may be – a range of philosophies can be. Moreover, even the most universally recognised and used concept, when subjected to Socratic scrutiny, might reveal not only that there is not universal agreement, after all, on the meaning of any given concept, but that every single person has a somewhat different take on each and every concept under the sun.

What’s more, there seems to be no such thing as a concept so abstract
or a question so off base that it can’t be fruitfully explored at Socrates Café. In the course of Socratizing, it often turns out to be the case that some of the most so-called abstract concepts are intimately related to the most profoundly relevant human experiences. In fact, it’s been my experience that virtually any question can be plumbed Socratically. Sometimes you don’t know what question will have the most lasting and significant impact until you take a risk and delve into it for a while.

What distinguishes the Socratic method from mere non-systematic inquiry is the sustained attempt to explore the ramifications of certain opinions and then offer compelling objections and alternatives. This scrupulous and exhaustive form of inquiry in many ways resembles the scientific method. But unlike Socratic inquiry, scientific inquiry would often lead us to believe that whatever is not measurable cannot be investigated. This “belief” fails to address such paramount human concerns as sorrow and joy and suffering and love.

Instead of focusing on the outer cosmos, Socrates focused primarily on human beings and their cosmos within, utilizing his method to open up new realms of self-knowledge while at the same time exposing a great deal of error, superstition, and dogmatic nonsense. The Spanish-born American philosopher and poet George Santayana said that Socrates knew that “the foreground of human life is necessarily moral and practical” and that “it is so even so for artists” — and even for scientists, try as some might to divorce their work from these dimensions of human existence.

Scholars call Socrates’ method the elenchus, which is Hellenistic Greek for inquiry or cross-examination. But it is not just any type of inquiry or examination. It is a type that reveals people to themselves that makes them see what their opinions really amount to. C. D. C. Reeve, professor of philosophy at Reed College, gives the standard explanation of an elenchus in saying that its aim “is not simply to reach adequate definitions” of such things as virtues; rather, it also has a “moral reformatory purpose, for Socrates believes that regular elenctic philosophizing makes people happier and more virtuous than anything else. . . . Indeed philosophizing is so important for human welfare, on his view, that he is willing to accept execution rather than give it up.”

Socrates’ method of examination can indeed be a vital part of existence, but I would not go so far as to say that it should be. And I do not think that Socrates felt that habitual use of this method “makes people happier.” The fulfilment that comes from Socratizing comes only at a price — it could well make us unhappier, more uncertain, more troubled, as well as more fulfilled. It
can leave us with a sense that we don’t know the answers after all, that we are much further from knowing the answers than we’d ever realised before engaging in Socratic discourse. And this is fulfilling – and exhilarating and humbling and perplexing. We may leave a Socrates Café – in all likelihood we will leave a Socrates Café – with a heady sense that there are many more ways and truths and lights by which to examine any given concept than we had ever before imagined.

In The Gay Science, Friedrich Nietzsche said, “I admire the courage and wisdom of Socrates in all he did, said – and did not say.” Nietzsche was a distinguished nineteenth-century classical philologist before he abandoned the academic fold and became known for championing a type of heroic individual who would create a life-affirming “will to power” ethic. In the spirit of his writings on such individuals, whom he described as “Supermen,” Nietzsche lauded Socrates as a “genius of the heart . . . whose voice knows how to descend into the depths of every soul . . . who teaches one to listen, who smooths rough souls and lets them taste a new yearning . . . who divines the hidden and forgotten treasure, the drop of goodness . . . from whose touch everyone goes away richer, not having found grace nor amazed, not as blessed and oppressed by the good of another, but richer in himself, opened . . . less sure perhaps . . . but full of hopes that as yet have no name.” I only differ with Nietzsche when he characterises Socrates as someone who descended into the depths of others’ souls. To the contrary, Socrates enabled those with whom he engaged in dialogues to descend into the depths of their own souls and create their own life-affirming ethic.

Santayana said that he would never hold views in philosophy which he did not believe in daily life, and that he would deem it dishonest and even spineless to advance or entertain views in discourse which were not those under which he habitually lived. But there is no neat divide between one’s views of philosophy and of life. They are overlapping and kindred views. It is virtually impossible in many instances to know what we believe in daily life until we engage others in dialogue. Likewise, to discover our philosophical views, we must engage with ourselves, with the lives we already lead. Our views form, change, evolve, as we participate in this dialogue. It is the only way truly to discover what philosophical colours we sail under. Everyone at some point preaches to himself and others what he does not yet practice; everyone acts in or on the world in ways that are in some way contradictory or inconsistent with the views he or she confesses or professes to hold. For instance, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, the influential founder of existentialism, put Socratic principles to use in writing his dissertation.
on the concept of irony in Socrates, often using pseudonyms so he could argue his own positions with himself. In addition, the sixteenth-century essayist Michel de Montaigne, who was called “the French Socrates” and was known as the father of scepticism in modern Europe, would write and add conflicting and even contradictory passages in the same work. And like Socrates, he believed the search for truth was worth dying for.

The Socratic method forces people “to confront their own dogmatism,” according to Leonard Nelson, a German philosopher who wrote on such subjects as ethics and theory of knowledge until he was forced by the rise of Nazism to quit. By doing so, participants in Socratic dialogue are, in effect, “forcing themselves to be free,” Nelson maintains. But they’re not just confronted with their own dogmatism. In the course of a Socrates Café, they may be confronted with an array of hypotheses, convictions, conjectures and theories offered by the other participants, and themselves – all of which subscribe to some sort of dogma. The Socratic method requires that – honestly and openly, rationally and imaginatively – they confront the dogma by asking such questions as: What does this mean? What speaks for and against it? Are there alternative ways of considering it that are even more plausible and tenable?

At certain junctures of a Socratic dialogue, the “forcing” that this confrontation entails – the insistence that each participant carefully articulate her singular philosophical perspective – can be upsetting. But that is all to the good. If it never touches any nerves, if it doesn’t upset, if it doesn’t mentally and spiritually challenge and perplex, in a wonderful and exhilarating way, it is not Socratic dialogue. This “forcing” opens us up to the varieties of experiences of others – whether through direct dialogue, or through other means, like drama or books, or through a work of art or a dance. It compels us to explore alternative perspectives, asking what might be said for or against each.

Keep this ethos in mind if you ever, for instance, feel tempted to ask a question like this one once posed at a Socrates Café: How can we overcome alienation? Challenge the premise of the question at the outset. You may need to ask: Is alienation something we always want to overcome? For instance, Shakespeare and Goethe may have written their timeless works because they embraced their sense of alienation rather than attempting to escape it. If this was so, then you might want to ask: Are there many different types, and degrees, of alienation? Depending on the context, are there some types that you want to overcome and other types that you do not at all want to overcome but rather want to incorporate into yourself? And to answer effectively such questions, you first need to ask and answer such questions as: What is alienation?
What does it mean to overcome alienation? Why would we ever want to overcome alienation? What are some of the many different types of alienation? What are the criteria or traits that link each of these types? Is it possible to be completely alienated? And many more questions besides.

Those who become smitten with the Socratic method of philosophical inquiry thrive on the question. They never run out of questions, or out of new ways to question. Some of Socrates Café’s most avid philosophers are, for me, the question personified.

A Dialogue of One

It is nearly midnight and I am making my way home after facilitating a Socrates Café at Mad Magda’s Russian Tea Room in the heart of San Francisco. It is only the second time I’ve facilitated Socrates Café at this eclectic establishment, yet more than fifty people have come each time. And each time I notice that a good many of the people who attend the discussion come alone, and seem to know few if any of the others who are on hand to take part. Yet after the discussion has formally ended, many cluster in small groups, talking with one another as if they are fast friends. The previous week, after discussing the question “What is enough?” I joined one of the clusters. But this week I join the ten or so folks who choose to beat a rather hasty retreat after the intense discussion comes to an end. I am anxious to be alone with my thoughts, to tend to the many questions in my mind that were generated by the dialogue.

The question into which we delved this evening was “Why question?” This question was posed only after a number of other intriguing ones were pitched, including: “Is there such a thing as human nature?” “What if anything is the nature of individuality?” “When is life not worth living?” “What is the nature of transcendence?” “Does human nature vary across time or cultures?” But then a striking teenage girl with hair that fell to her ankles said, “Why question?” Until then she’d seemed more intent on gabbing with her friends than listening to the questions being proposed. We turned to her almost in unison. She looked at us all with a Mona Lisa–like smile, as if she had only been biding her time and somehow knew we’d pick her question – which we did.

Why question? Perhaps we don’t have a choice, according to John Dewey, a leading American philosopher, educator, and social reformer, who noted that Socrates said we are “questioning beings” who “must search out the reason of things, and not accept them from custom and authority.” As Gerasimos Xenophon Santas, who was chairman of the philosophy department at the University of California–Irvine, noted
in his study of Plato’s early Socratic dialogues, “Socrates is questioning all the time. He greets people with questions, he teaches and refutes them with questions, he leaves them with questions – he actually talks to them with questions.” Even when he isn’t talking, Socrates seems to be “holding a silent question-and-answer session” with an imaginary interlocutor. It really seems as if Socrates, for one, has no choice but to question. But most people, at least adults, seem to have to make that choice.

The question “Why question?” turned out to be a much harder question to answer than perhaps any of us at this Socrates Café had presumed. The problem was, in order to answer it, we first needed to see if we were on the same page in terms of what a question means, is, does, and can do.

It seemed most of us taking part in this dialogue had taken for granted that we all thoroughly understood the concept of question. But judging from the wildly diverse responses that followed, each of us had a very different take on what precisely a question is and what purpose it serves.

“People only ask questions if they already know what answer they want” was the firm conviction of a woman who was sitting apart from the rest of the group. Her bright blond hair was in curlers and mostly covered by a lavender scarf that seemed to be patterned with amoebas. “For instance,” she went on, “if a woman asks you, ‘How’s my hair?’ she doesn’t want you to tell her the truth if it looks bad. She wants you to say, ‘It looks wonderful.’”

Needless to say, many others disagreed and said that just the opposite was true, that people only ask questions if they don’t know the answer. “People ask questions out of curiosity, out of wonder,” said a burly man with a raspy voice and extraordinarily arched brows. He had been stirring his coffee since long before the discussion began, and he had yet to take a sip. “I don’t know of anyone who would ask a question if they already knew what they wanted the answer to be.”

The woman wouldn’t hear of it. “People know that curiosity and wonder always get you in trouble,” she said, for some reason snapping her fingers in the process. “So if they don’t already know, or feel pretty sure they know, what the answer is, they don’t ask the question.”

“I think that may be true in some cases,” said the willowy teenage girl whose question we were discussing. Again, she hadn’t seemed to be paying attention at all, so absorbed was she in a conversation with her friends; but she had been listening to every word. “But in all cases?” she went on. “How would we ever have new and unexpected discoveries if we only asked questions to which we already knew the answer?”

“That’s a loaded question,” the woman with curlers replied. “If I disagree
with you,” she then said, her glance volleying between the teenage girl and the burly man, “you’ll think I’m just being stubborn. And if I agree with what you just said, you’ll think I’ve seen the error of my ways and that you’ve won me over. It’s like asking a man, ‘Did you stop beating your wife?’ There’s no fair way to answer that. You’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t.”

The teenage girl looked baffled. “I don’t see how what you just said has anything to do with . . .” But before she could complete her sentence one of her friends interjected, “Many scientists find answers to questions that were not even asked. Such as the accidental discovery of penicillin. That was found while altogether different questions were being asked. So questions are used for experimentation and in many cases they lead to unanticipated answers.”

“One of the biggest dangers lies with not asking questions,” said an electrical engineer whose sombre suit matched his countenance. “Because that practice limits knowledge. It leads to closed minds and closed societies.”

“What you say brings to mind that character Yossarian in Joseph Heller’s Catch-22,” says another participant. “He was described as a ‘collector of good questions,’ which he used to ‘wring knowledge’ out of people. But his superiors in his American bomber squadron always tried to shut him up whenever he began to ask questions because they felt ‘there was no telling what people might find out once they felt free to ask whatever questions they wanted to.’ Yossarian’s superiors thought questions were subversive, to be avoided at all costs. So what happened was a colonel enacted a rule that only permitted people who never asked questions to ask questions. Catch-22. I wonder sometimes if that’s where we’re headed.”

The last remark of the evening came from a diffident and somewhat finicky young man wearing a red and white beanie and a faded T-shirt. A regular Socrates Café—goer no matter where the event is held, he always asks penetrating questions. “Doesn’t it seem like if we did nothing else the entire evening but ask one question after another, we might reveal more about who we are than if we tried to answer any one of them?” he asked. His insight rang true for me, and judging by the thoughtful looks on many other faces, I suspect it rang true for most of the other participants as well.

And now that the discussion is over, I’m anxious to be alone so I can ponder the question he raised. While driving home, I ask myself, “What questions have I been asking myself of late?”

It strikes me that a question that just won’t go away has been . . . What is it I fear? Often it seems that fear prevents people from asking questions of themselves
or others. Before I began regularly facilitating Socrates Café far and wide, I feared being alone. But now that Socratising has caught on like I never dreamed, and consequently I am in constant demand and have been facilitating upwards of ten philosophical discussions each week at cafés and nursing homes and schools and universities, I seem to fear not having enough time alone. So I have come to cherish the time I spend alone after Socrates Café. After an intensive dialogue, there’s nothing I like better than the stark counterpoint of being by myself.

But tonight, no sooner do I open the front door to my apartment than the phone rings.

“Hello?” I say, hoping it is a telemarketer so I can quickly hang up. A barely audible voice on the other end says, “I came to the Socrates Café tonight. I hope it’s okay to call you.”

“Sure,” I say without conviction as I make a mental note to get an unlisted number.

“I didn’t say a word during the discussion,” she then says, her voice wavering. She doesn’t tell me her name and I don’t think to ask. “I just don’t like to talk in groups.”

“That’s quite all right,” I say. “As you probably noticed, I never put anyone on the spot and make them feel like they have to talk. You can participate just by listening. In fact, I find that some of the most active participants at Socrates Café are often those who ‘just’ listen.”

There is a long pause—so long that I think she might be through talking. In fact, I hope I’ve said whatever needed to be said to bring this conversation to a quick end. But then she says, “I’m calling because I want to know if you think it’s possible for me to have a Socrates Café by myself?”

A solo Socrates Café? A tête-à-tête with only one tête?

“Yes,” I tell her. “Absolutely.”

“How?” she asks immediately.

“I bet you already hold a Socrates Café of sorts with yourself from time to time,” I say.

“?” she replies wordlessly.

“I don’t really think there’s much difference in having a dialogue in public, like Socrates Café, and the inner dialogue that we have with ourselves much of the time,” I say. “Hannah Arendt once wrote that Socrates ‘makes public in discourse the thinking process – the dialogue that soundlessly goes on within me, between me and myself.’ And I think this is very much the case.

“I bet you ask yourself questions all the time,” I go on to say, “and that you make heartfelt attempts not only to answer these questions but to examine the answers you come up with from many different angles
and perspectives. For instance, I bet you don’t realise how often you question who you are, who you want to be, and try to come up with a number of ‘answers.”

“Well . . .” she says, “I suppose that’s true enough.” She goes silent on the other end of the line. But eventually my phone correspondent says, “Lately I can’t sleep at nights because I keep asking myself, ‘What is the meaning of life?’” There’s another pause before she says, “Actually, I don’t so much ask myself the question as the question just sort of appears. And it seems like there’s nothing I can do to make it go away, even when I try to answer it.”

She pauses yet again. “I guess I should back up a bit,” she then says. “My niece died of leukaemia several months ago. She was fourteen. She was a truly gifted child. One of those children who could’ve gone on to excel in practically any field. Our nearest and dearest always said how much alike she and I were. When I was a child everyone used to say the sky was the limit for me. I liked studying everything, and excelled in everything—so much so that I could never figure out one thing that I’d like to do or be. But . . . well, I guess there’s no ‘but.’ The long and short of it is: that became a moot point. I ended up getting married at nineteen. I dropped out of college because my husband didn’t want me to work. We got divorced thirteen years later. Now I work as a bookkeeper. I feel . . . well, I don’t know what I feel. I don’t feel comfortable saying anything more about this, except to say that the ‘What is the meaning to life?’ question won’t go away. So I don’t get much sleep these days.”

The woman does not say anything more to me for a short while. I suspect that she feels, like me, that the lull in our conversation is a comfortable and even necessary one. “I don’t really know, though . . .” she reflects after a while. “Like I said, I can never come up with any sort of satisfying answer to the question ‘What’s the meaning of life?’

“No, that’s not it,” she sighs. “I don’t even know how to begin to answer the question.”

“Maybe you’re not asking the question in the right way,” I say.

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe,” I say, “before you try to answer the question as you’ve posed it—or as it’s been posed to you—maybe you first need to ask and answer other questions.”

“What?”

“Like ‘Whose life am I talking about? Are you talking about ‘what is the meaning of life’ as it relates to your life? If so, you need to say so explicitly.’

“I think what I’m really trying to ask is ‘What gives my life meaning?’” she says.

“There you go!” I say. I am surprised by how enthused I am that she has
discovered this ‘new way’ of asking the question, particularly since I’d been so reluctant to talk. But the one thing that has ceased to surprise me about Socratic dialogue is how it so often invigorates and even rejuvenates me. I no longer am in a hurry to hang up the phone and be alone. “This new way of asking the question may lead to a more promising answer.”

Then she says, “Oh no.”

“What?” I say. I worry I’ve somehow inadvertently offended her.

“The way I put the question didn’t really explain what I mean by meaning. So now I think I’ve come up with a better way to ask it.” She sounds apologetic.

“That’s wonderful,” I say, impressed that she has already become a more critical questioner. “Let’s hear it.”

“What I think I’m really trying to ask is ‘What can I do to give my life the kind of meaning that makes my spirit soar, that makes me feel like I’m making this world at least a little bit better place to live in?’” The tone of her voice becomes more and more upbeat and even excited as she formulates the question – as if the question itself is an epiphany for her.

“That’s a beautiful question,” I tell her. “I don’t know the answer, but I bet you’ll figure it out, now that you’ve posed it this way. And I’ll bet you’ll come up with many more questions, and answers, as you further pursue this line of questioning.”

She breathes what seems to be a sigh of relief.

I then go on to say, “It seems to me that no matter what question you ask yourself, whether completely alone or with other people, if you give it your all when you try to answer it, you are trying to better understand yourself. And self-understanding can be self-transcendence. It can put your life in new perspectives. You can see your place in the scheme of things from new vistas and vantage points, because you are further discovering your mind. And discovering your mind can be like discovering a new universe.

“What’s more, new questions have the potential to lead to new discoveries,” I continue. “They can have a huge impact on your life. Answering a question like the one you’re posing now requires that you use your imagination. It requires that you dare to think up compelling alternatives to ways you’re currently going about life and living. It requires that you take risks with your thinking. And then the even harder work would involve taking concrete steps toward making your imaginative vision a reality.”

“I see what you mean,” she says. “Or at least I think I do.” She laughs loud and rather long, and for the first time does not seem the least bit self-conscious. She is excited. She says, “Until just now I hadn’t realised that
I’ve been so frustrated because I haven’t asked the question in a way that would ever lead me to any sort of meaningful answers.”

“There’re no shortcuts to the questioning life,” I say. “I think the questioning life in many ways is the ‘examined life’ Socrates talked about: It’s hard work – trying to figure out new ways, better ways, to ask the questions that perplex you the most, so you can come up with more meaningful and fruitful answers.

“But you don’t need a community outside yourself to do this. At times it might be helpful, though. And there are many other kinds of viable communities besides the type of community at Socrates Café. Like the ‘community’ of world literature. I know that by reading books such as Ford Madox Ford’s The Good Soldier and Robert Musil’s The Man Without Qualities and Hermann Broch’s The Guiltless, I discovered a number of perspectives on human nature that I most likely would never have come upon any other way. And these perspectives helped me give more meaning to my own life.”

“Books like Dostoevsky’s Notes from the Underground and Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man and Elias Canetti’s Auto da Fé have had the same sort of impact on me,” she replies. “Reading books like that made me ask questions about my life, and about humanity in general, that I’d probably never have asked without reading them.”

“So you see? You’re already further on your way than you realised,” I tell her as I try to imagine what she looks like, the expression on her face. “Asking questions can enable you to experiment, to try on for size different ways of seeing.

“That’s what I do when I catechise myself with variations of the ‘What is the meaning of life?’ question. I don’t simply try to come up with a definitive answer right away to whatever way I’ve formulated this question. Instead, I try to come up with a number of different points of view, a number of potential answers. I play devil’s advocate with myself. And then I ask myself, ‘What speaks for, and against, each of these perspectives?’

“In fact,” I continue, “only after years of asking and attempting to answer variations of the question ‘How can I give my life the kind of meaning that makes my life worthwhile for me?’ did I come to the realization that the only life for me was to be sort of a Johnny Appleseed of philosophers. My questions took years to bear fruit. And it took even longer, once I had some tentative answers, to transform thought into deed. But once I started the journey, I wouldn’t have dreamed of quitting. And my life has gone in the most exhilarating directions.”

I finally pause to draw a breath. I’ve said more than enough. As I wait to see if my anonymous caller has something more to say, I realise just how much this
conversation has put me in a more focused frame of mind for my own self-questioning.

“You know what I’m going to do?” she says to me at long last. Without waiting for a reply, she says, “I’m going to make myself a cup of coffee, then go sit out on the back porch and spend the rest of the night thinking of new ways to ask, and answer, ‘What is the meaning of life?’”

Her voice is no longer timid and wavering. I can almost hear her smile. But before I have a chance to urge her on, I hear a click, then a buzzing. She has hung up. I doubt she even realises what she’s done. After all, it’s just dawned on her that she has a lot of Socratic questioning to do.

As do I.
Download free sample packs, loops & sounds. These free samples are perfect for any Hip Hop, Trap, EDM, House producer and is also suitable for many styles of music such as Funk, Soul, RnB, House Chillout and any other sounds that blend Hip Hop with Electronica as well. These free samples are perfect for any Hip Hop, Trap, EDM, House producer and is also suitable for many styles of music such as Funk, Soul, RnB, House Chillout and any other sounds that blend Hip Hop with Electronica as well. Recent free releases. The free loops, samples and sounds listed here have been kindly uploaded by other users. If you use any of these loops please leave your comments. Description: Check out part 2 (Keys). Click on my profile picture to download the rest of the stems! Campuri Loop Pack Out Now (Download For Free) Other stems/parts (Violin and Second Violin) and other exclusive loops, click on my profile picture and download the free sample pack - Campuri! Haunted Keys Part 1 Of 2. LotrOnTheKeys 16th Jun 2020.