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Beginning in Wonder, Remaining in Wonder: On Socrates and the Practice of Philosophy

STEPHEN C. ROWE

Wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder.

—Socrates

Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155

It is my thesis, along with Socrates, that “philosophy begins in wonder,” and that its vocation is to enable us to remain in wonder. This vocation is one of identifying those moments in our lives of genuine wonder, of finding the support and discipline that make it possible for us to remain in those moments, and of transforming our lives in such a way that these moments move from the exceptional and anomalous to the ordinary. Further, in the distinctiveness of the Western vision, this transformative practice has an essential relational quality. We do not achieve and maintain the capacity for wonder—at least not in an adult life—through introspection, or merely intellectual assent to correct doctrine, or through some return to the wonder of childhood. Rather, the capacity for wonder in adult life arises through a certain kind of specifically human relationship and practice. The genius of Socrates is that he makes it possible for us to envision and enter into this kind of relationship.

Yet it must be said that our philosophical and cultural tradition has for the most part not been faithful to Socrates. In fact, it has largely forgotten Socrates, or turned him into something he is not: frequently either the consummate lawyer who is able to break down anyone’s argument, “making the weaker argument defeat the stronger” (*Apology*; 18c), or a mere literary device for the presentation of Platonic doctrine. The chief reason for the forgetting is the development of intellectualism, the closing of the intellect in on itself in such a way that it becomes the primary organ in human life, and an organ that is not open to any influence higher than its own internal operation. The intellect ceased to be a vehicle and a path to make contact with higher reality; the intellect closed, to become an end in itself.

Masao Abe, the Japanese philosopher of the Kyoto School, helps us understand and come to terms with our Western difficulties. In his *Zen and Western Thought*, Abe says that as of the time of Aristotle the West became locked into an “objectification approach” (134). The insistence in this approach on the subject-object distinction and deductive certainty, or what the American scholar Jon Moline calls “verificationism” (x), has caused Western culture to become alienated from Being and to forget higher orders of knowing and relating. William James makes much the same point when he refers to “vicious intellectualism,” and claims that this closure of the intellect is the reason that “philosophy has been on a false scent since the days of Socrates and Plato” (150). Alfred North Whitehead points to this same difficulty with his phrase “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness” (10); again, the actuality of life is missed and violated in the name of conceptual order, in what becomes an idolatry of the intellect that has taken hold in the West—an eclipse of wonder.

The discovery of Western “logocentrism” in our time leads to all sorts of peculiar and dangerous reactions—defensive intellectualism, outright rejection of the intellect, intellectualism against the intellect. We live in the midst of analytical schools that react by further turning inward, fragmenting and professionalizing the intellect; deconstructionist schools that simply want to tear down—as with the young dialecticians in Plato’s *Republic*, who are “like puppy dogs, they rejoice in pulling and tearing at all who come near them” (261); neoconservative schools that want to withdraw from the present, smugly asserting “the classics” and their private access to some secret knowledge; and schools of the Rorty enthusiasm that want to “poeticize,” so that philosophy can become narrative or fiction or most anything. Locating the proper function of the intellect within a life that is fully human is arguably the major challenge for philosophy—and for culture generally—in our era.

Well, I don’t want to get carried away in all this. My purpose was to discuss Socrates. The point of the above reflections is to propose that, in the midst of all of the wild and dangerous movements of our pluralistic and multicultural era, there is also great opportunity. Out of the confounding and relativizing and death of “traditional” philosophy, we have the opportunity to reencounter and reappropriate the greatness of Socrates. My thesis, then, is that Socrates is, to use the language of our time, a “survivor,” and that we can survive the death of tradition along with him, being reborn in our love of wisdom, beginning in wonder.

The statement that follows, then, is one brief attempt to actualize that opportunity and bring Socrates back. I do this by suggesting that coming to the state of wonder requires that we learn to “know nothing” and to “know ourselves,” and that this becomes possible through the kind of relationship that is dialectic, or the practice of “the examined life.” In this essential relational practice we come to the proper function of the intellect and the wonder of our full human presence.

Socrates’ life and work are presented most fully in the famous dialogues of his student, Plato. In the *Apology*, the dialogue that contains Socrates’ defense at the trial in which he was condemned to death, we have something close to autobiography.

Here we see that the distinctiveness of Socrates' career began when he received a message from the oracle at Delphi to the effect that there was no man wiser than Socrates. The ambiguity of this statement, which Socrates understood as a riddle, drove him to search out and engage in dialogue people who were reputed to be wise. This life long investigation he undertook not for his own purposes, but "at the god's bidding" and as "Herculean labors" in "service to the God" (26). What he found out, again and again, was that those who were thought to be wise actually were not, and that Socrates did indeed possess wisdom, a "certain wisdom": "I have gained this reputation, Athenians, simply by reason of a certain wisdom. But what kind of wisdom? It is by just that wisdom which is perhaps human wisdom. In that, it may be, I am really wise" (25).

Socrates' career consisted of pointing out on the god's behalf that people who thought themselves wise really were not, and of employing among young people his dialectical method of moving to "human wisdom." In the course of this activity Socrates roused such indignation that he was convicted of corrupting youth with unorthodox theories and arguments, and he was executed.

But what is this human wisdom? In my own efforts to enter into the conversation with and about Socrates, I have come to see that there are three essential and necessarily interdependent components to his wisdom: knowing nothing, knowing thyself, and practicing dialectic. These components are so related that the third is inclusive of the first two: knowing nothing and knowing oneself occur in and through dialectic. It is not at all incidental, then, that the Platonic report on the components of Socratic wisdom is presented in the form of dialogues. The dialogues engage us as readers in the very same process of transformation that they discuss, enabling us to solve the riddle of Socrates' wisdom alongside him. They thereby allow us to participate directly in his solution, rather than just thinking about it or "feeling" it (in fact, both thinking and feeling are specifically frustrated and relativized in the movement to Socratic wisdom). The dialogues accomplish this participatory quality by their interweaving of all three components into what is said and done within certain human interactions. The interweaving is how the dialogues achieve their greatness—and their difficulty as well (like the parables of Jesus, they can be grasped at different levels). For the components are not only interdependent, but must be actualized at the same time as part of a single practice leading toward wisdom; they are not to be regarded as separate steps. Again, the third component is inclusive: knowing nothing and knowing oneself become possible and are developed in the context of a particular way of human relatedness. Dialectic, as the inclusive practice, is then synonymous with philosophy, the love or friendship of wisdom.

The first component is "knowing nothing": "I do not think that I know what I do not know" (*Apology* 26). This not knowing of Socrates is clearly not the confession of simple stupidity or ignorance, nor is it merely a ploy to disarm or confuse those with whom he is in dialogue. Neither is it only a statement of modesty, knowing that what ordinarily passes for wisdom is worth little or nothing in light of what is really

important. There is something deeper than knowing in the usual sense of that term: human wisdom or this deeper kind of knowing consists not in the mastery of doctrine or formulation, not in the knowing of particular things, but rather in the actualization of a power or capacity. We might say that wisdom entails coming into contact with the source of knowing, rather than only with particular things that are known. In the midst of a certain kind of relationship Socrates is able to know nothing in the sense of suspending his lower forms of knowing, in such a way as to become transparent to Truth.

However, there is an undeniably private and hence mysterious quality to this first component of knowing nothing. It is the “mystical” and “strangeness” aspect of Socrates that has been discussed—and not discussed—over the centuries. Though we have no complete testimony as to the content of his method of practice, there are some powerful clues as to the meaning of this private aspect of knowing nothing. First, in the *Phaedo*, he says that “. . . those who practice philosophy in the right way are in training for dying and they fear death least of all men” (16). By this and related statements he means that the practice of philosophy leads to a transcendence of the physical and ego self, and a calm acceptance of the limitations and mortality of the lower senses of self. Second, there are reports from several of the dialogues of Socrates’ “rapt” or periods of contemplation. In the *Symposium*, for example, he is late for the party because he is standing on a neighbor’s porch. Someone suggests that he be interrupted. The narrator says “You’d much better leave him to himself. It’s quite a habit of his, you know; off he goes and there he stands, no matter where it is” (529-30). Later in the same dialogue it is reported that once Socrates stood like this for twenty-four straight hours.

Though we have no report as to exactly what Socrates was doing in these moments, except perhaps through what Plato later says about contemplation in *The Republic*, we do know that this “standing” was an important part of Socrates’ life. We are given another clue in the *Apology* as to the content of this mystical experience: “. . . I am subject to a divine or supernatural experience. . . . It began in my early childhood—a sort of voice which comes to me. . . . In the past the prophetic voice to which I have become accustomed has always been my constant companion, opposing me even in trivial things if I was going to take the wrong course” (37, 46). I think it is fair to assume that his “knowing nothing” is similar to other statements of mystical experience or meditation, as the immersion in a “nothing” that is not negative or merely empty, but rather beyond description and the source somehow of everything (perhaps parallel to the Hebrew sense of God creating the world *ex nihilo*). In this regard it is hard not to see a connection between Socrates’ wisdom and the “perspectiveless perspective” and *sunyata* of Masao Abe and the Buddhists. Clearly Socrates is no stranger to mysticism. And yet perhaps part of the essential riddle of Socrates for us today is that he refuses to describe this fundamental experience or to provide advice as to how we should move within it, except in the form of occasional comments “in the language of the mysteries” (*Phaedo* 10).

The second component appears initially to be the opposite of knowing nothing. This component is stated succinctly in the inscription over the entrance to the oracle at Delphi: "Know Thyself." It is not possible to unlock the Socratic power of knowing nothing or to hear the inner voice to which he refers unless one has known one's ego or self in the lower sense. Here the Eastern understanding of ego as being comprised of both emotion and intellect applies. In the *Phaedo*, the dialogue which concludes with Socrates drinking the hemlock, he speaks of the fear of the ego, that is likened to a child within us: "You seem to have this childish fear that the wind would really dissolve and scatter the soul, as it leaves the body, especially if one happens to die in a high wind and not in calm weather." The remedy for this aspect of the self is to know the fears of this child within, and to ". . . sing a charm over him every day until you have charmed away his fears" (28).

On the intellectual side, knowing oneself means knowing what one stands for, what position one takes, what vocation and commitments in life one chooses. With Socrates we see this clearly in his keen awareness of his vocation, serving the god of the oracle come what may, even to the point of becoming, as he explains in the *Apology*, "in great poverty as a result of my service to the god" (28), not to mention his commitment to his community, which he held until death. Knowing oneself in the intellectual sense is visible throughout the dialogues, with Socrates' insistence on the ability to give an articulate account as an essential mark of any genuine knowing—he will not tolerate instinctual or intuitive claims to know. Neither will he tolerate disbelief, or confusing the "knowing nothing" with skepticism or the mere suspension of belief. Finally, at the level of intellectual knowing it is necessary, as he says in the *Phaedo*, to "risk the belief" in such things as the immortality of the soul and an afterlife, and to repeat the belief to oneself "as if it were an incantation"—even though "no sensible man would insist that these things are as I have described them" (64). The maintenance of certain intellectual beliefs is necessary in order to sustain the life of encounter that is vital.

Without knowing the self, the knowing nothing is easily perverted or misplaced; it is mistaken—in both the self and others—for vacant silence, mere idiosyncrasy or animal spontaneity, or untamed parts of the self surreptitiously claiming supremacy (or mystical exemption from the human condition). Knowing oneself, in both the ego sense and the intellectual sense, is a necessary, though not yet sufficient, condition for actualizing the fully human wisdom that Socrates exemplifies and leads us to throughout his life.

The third and inclusive component of Socratic wisdom is that activity and capacity known as "dialectic." By this he means not the rehearsing or memorizing of what others have said, or the ability to track complex arguments for their own sake, but inquiry, discussion, fully mutual encounter with others in pursuit of the truth. Dialectic, as is made clear in *The Republic*, is the highest human capacity; it is the art of asking and answering questions with others in the active and continuing quest for truth. At the same time, dialectic is also characterized as the direct perception of ab-

solute good—"at the end of the intellectual world" (51). Dialectic, as both continuing quest and direct perception, is at the heart of the famous "examined life" of Socrates: "... I tell you that to let no day pass without discussing goodness and all the other subjects about which you hear me talking and examining both myself and others is really the very best thing that a man can do, and that life without this sort of examination is not worth living" (*Apology* 23). It is as though the examining is a sort of hygiene, a way of cleaning out the false knowing that is continually generated by our ego self, so that we can "know nothing" and hence know ourself in the sense of being receptive to our own "inner voice." So important is dialectic that Socrates warns: "... we should not become misologues, as people become misanthropes. There is no greater evil one can suffer than to hate reasonable discourse" (*Phaedo* 40).

Socrates, the "gadfly to the city," practiced his knowing nothing and knowing himself by enabling others to do the same. And this enabling comes not in the manner of delivering second hand answers in the form of intellectual formulation, but rather in a kind of relatedness that guides people to discover truth first hand and for themselves. The mark of having attained truth, therefore, is not the possession of intellectual objects but the activation of a capacity and a way of being, a transformation of the whole person. It is in this regard that Socrates is spoken of as a midwife; he engages us in the kind of interaction that gives birth to our own deep self, within the paradoxical simultaneity of not knowing and knowing, openness and definiteness. The full Socratic method involves both answering and asking questions within a context of transformative movement toward realization of that which is fully human (*The Republic* 255). The highest ideal for Socrates, then, is neither isolated contemplation nor the holding of correct beliefs, as most readers of Plato's dialogues in the traditional period have assumed, but rather a way of relationship in the world.¹

The three components of Socratic wisdom and philosophy, then, entail the practice of knowing nothing, along with knowing that something which constitutes the self, within the activity of making it possible for others to do the same. The "human wisdom"—the practice of it, the *existence* of it—requires others; it is pluralistic (not relativistic), conversational, and ongoing. Philosophy is the love of wisdom, not the holding of it; it arises at that moment in which it is being sought and practiced. And, in our time especially, it must be remembered that, though reason is both the path and the vehicle for Socrates, it is not the destination. Intellect is a means rather than an end, a very powerful and useful tool, but a tool nonetheless, a means of arriving "at the end of the intellectual world."

When it became clear that Socrates would in fact be executed, his friend Crito came to him with a plan of escape. He could easily leave the community that would convict him and live out his days in peace somewhere else. He refused. To do so would have been to violate his commitment to the community by qualifying and confusing his vocation. And so the original act of civil disobedience, the act of publicly and articulately questioning the letter of the law in the name of the spirit of the

law, with a willingness to accept the consequences, was concluded with an execution.

I think that Jon Moline is right that the meaning of Socrates has been eclipsed by an “intellectualist bias” (33) that has held sway in Western culture since Aristotle (though some have suggested it began earlier, with Plato’s limitations in his attempt to present faithfully the teachings of his master, with the Platonic resolution of Socratic wisdom into a system of thought in *The Republic* and the later dialogues).² Socrates has been understood, for the most part, not in terms of actualization of the highest human capacity, but rather only as explication of what came to be taken as Platonic doctrine. The Socratic energy, the energy that arises from the Socratic practice, has been blocked for the most part by intellectualism (yet not cut off entirely; we keep coming back to Socrates, receiving what energy we can, attracted despite blockage by his radiance). One of the most telling indications of blockage is the virtual absence of attention among traditional Western philosophers to the place and conduct of “contemplation,” Socrates’ “standing,” or any other inner discipline, even among those who claim faithfulness to Socrates. It is peculiar indeed that traditional Western culture elevated contemplation to the status of the highest human activity without attending to the context or method of this activity; it is no wonder, then, that it came to mean merely intellectual remove, the priority of thought over action—intellectualism. Likewise, it is astonishing how little attention is given in Western philosophy to the actual practice of Socrates and the dynamics of the transformative human relationship (perhaps here we have the creative contribution of feminist philosophy in our era).³

Fortunately, however, there is strong evidence that the intellectualist orientation is breaking up in our “post-metaphysical” era, and that Socrates is once again becoming available to us. Underneath the noisy clamor of the post-analytic, postfoundationalist postmodernism, a noise that is so obviously the disappointed protest of those who have just discovered the limitations of the intellect but not yet the positive meaning of this discovery, there is also occurring a quiet revival, a rebirth of Socrates.

The breakup of intellectualism in our time provides us with the opportunity to have access to and actualize the immortality of Socrates. But this opportunity is demanding. We are called to live beyond our ego pretenses to knowing, to develop a stance of modesty from which to learn, in both solitude and solidarity, to know nothing. Yet Socrates tells us that we cannot do this by becoming anti-intellectualist, throwing out our formulations altogether, but only by holding the work of the intellect in a different light, as the examined commitments that constitute our own finite beings—knowing ourselves. And it is perhaps the saving grace of Socrates that he shows us that this way of being, which seems impossible when it is merely spoken of or undertaken in privatistic isolation, is precisely what occurs when we enter into the fully human relationship.

Returning to our earlier theme of death and rebirth in our own era, in Socrates we see the survivor: the way to being fully human only opens with the death of our

initial inclinations and ego senses of certainty, and is sustained by an openness to that ultimate source, guidance, and fulfillment which cannot be named or contained within any formulation. Rebirth in this new way of being is described, in a later Socratic dialogue, in what sounds very much like the language of enlightenment: "Acquaintance with [this way] must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining" (*Letters* 1589). Is this not the fullness of wonder, not just the momentary wonder of a puzzled Theaetetus, but the sustained wonder that comes with the serious practice of philosophy?

Although what appears to us as the "mystical" element in Socrates remains mostly hidden, as a private or preliminary activity, that which it is preparation for is precisely what the dialogues of Socrates bring to light. Perhaps what Socrates is saying in saying so little about the mystical is that finally there is no difference between the mystical and that which occurs in dialectic, or that "the mystical"—the essential mode of wonder—occurs in its genuine and complete form in relationship, not isolation. The transformative power of the fully and distinctively human encounter is what those dialogues are about; this human encounter is what happens in them and through them, even for us as readers at the remove of many centuries. The implication is clear: the mark of true and mature spirituality is not detached, mystical purity, but rather full immersion in the world. In Socrates we encounter the wonder of full human presence that only occurs in the presence of others, and that is associated with divine presence.

Notes

1. For a study of this crucial question as to whether contemplation or return to dialectical encounter in the world is the highest ideal in Plato, see Mitchell Miller, "Platonic Provocations: Reflections on the Soul and the Good in *The Republic*," in *Platonic Investigations*, ed. Dominic J. O'Meara (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1987), pp. 163-193.
2. On the difference in Socrates between the early and the middle dialogues, and the distinction between Socrates and Plato, see Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithica, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), and Jacob Needleman, *The Heart of Philosophy* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984).
3. For a strong indication as to how this might be the case, see Caroline Whitbeck, "A Different Reality: Feminist Ontology," in Carol C. Gould, ed., *Beyond Domination: New Perspectives on Women and Philosophy* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983), pp. 64-88.

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