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

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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 wild and dangerous intellectualist, intellectual, intellectualist
Abe says that as a critic of "the current approach to confirmation and deduction," he is a "verificationist" and to forget high philosophy at the same point where the intellect is the highest Socrates and Plato. He says his phrase "the fundamental connectionless and violated the intellect that
The difficulty is to forget and dangerous intellect, intellectual, intellectualism, and to react by further deconstruction. The letters in Plato's going at all who come from the present secret knowledge, that philosophy has a proper function and a challenge for philosophy.
Well, I don't think Socrates. The philosophical "survival of the wild and dangerous" also great opportunity for "the existential" philosophy and the greatness of Socrates at the same time, a "survival and being reborn in the intelligence"
The statement, and bring Socrates' life and bring Socrates' life requires that we becomes possible to the "the existential" and the "the examined life and the connection of the intelligence"
Socrates' life and the examination, Plato. In this way, which he was committed.
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 a human wisdom, a doctrine or form of rationalization of a certain contact with the truly known. In the movement in the sense of such a knowing come transparency.

However, the second component of Socrates that has no complete or satisfactory terms, some powerful human wisdom. First, in the Phaedo are in training for the statements he makes about physical and ego-sense, he is speaking: Socrates' "raptures" are late for the party he tells us that he be inspired by the "god". It's quite a habit of the "is" (529-30). Later we see this for twenty-four.

Though we have components, except perhaps in the Republic, we do not begin, as they are given another "... I am subject to childhood—a somatic which I have become a thing me only in time it is fair to assume that the to the mere empty, but (perhaps paralleling) it is hard not to regard it is hard not to regard it is hard not to regard it is hard not to regard it is hard not to regard it
When he received a man wiser than he, he stood as a riddle, reputed to be a pose, but "at the riddle." What he found actually were not, but have gained this kind of wisdom that, it may be, I have gained this.

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The conversation potential and necessary thing, knowing at the third is in and through the components of knowing nothing. "feeling" it (in the movement quality by which within certain the components of knowing engage us in the fluctuation, enabling us to allow us to partic-

"... 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 absolute good—"at the end of the quest and direct perception..." I tell you that we must examine subjects about which the very best examination is not very hygienic, a way of examining our ego self, so that we are not being receptive of the very things that warn: "... we shall lose our freedom. There is no greater freedom than this" (40).

Socrates, the "greatest of the self by enabling one of delivering secondary objects in a kind of role-playing of oneself. The mark of intellectual activity objects but the whole person, engages us in the paradoxical simultaneous. The full Socratic context of transformation in The Republic 2," the temptation nor the vehicle of the traditional person.

The three components of knowing oneself, within the activity of delivering secondary objects in a kind of role-playing of oneself. The mark of intellectual activity objects but the whole person, engages us in the paradoxical simultaneous. The full Socratic context of transformation in The Republic 2," the temptation nor the vehicle of the traditional person.

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Knowing nothing, one stands for, some legend tells us, as the god of dialectic, the god of knowing nothing, the god who knows one’s idiosyncrasy or misplaced; the god who knows supremacy of the self, in both the arena of the whole person, in the paradoxical simultaneity of not knowing and knowing, openness and definiteness. 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). 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 his 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 not 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—intricate. 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, postfounding of intellectualist 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 inclination and the Intellect within any for...
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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

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 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), and Jacob Needleman,

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.
Works Cited


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Our father back man. We didn't
feet out behind
lay claim to if we
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heavy footsteps
final. This felt fine with him again.
Soon there would
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Superman was
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finger, until she
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