Socrates dreamt of a society of critical thinkers. Linda Elder explores how we can cultivate Socratic traits and methods to develop clear-headed and rational thought.

Reason to live

If Socrates were alive today, I can’t help but wonder what he would think of the muddle that seems to be the human species. Considered a thinker par excellence, Socrates sought reasonable and logical ways to approach issues and problems. Even in search of rational ways of living, he tried to help others do the same. Believing that education should lead to a deeper and more coherent world view, and that people need to develop skills and habits of thought to reason well through life’s myriad problems, he continually pondered how the examined life could be achieved.

It is safe to say that we have strayed a good distance from Socrates’ vision of education, not that his vision has ever been realised in any significant sense in human cultures. And although he knew full well that critical or rational societies could not be readily or easily achieved, I think even he would be shocked at how far removed we are, still, from achieving the world he thought might be possible. To put the point more succinctly, two millennia after Socrates’ death, we are worlds away from systematically embodying his ideas, either theoretically or practically.

There has never been a more important time in human history for the pursuit of Socrates’ vision. As the world becomes smaller and smaller, with more and more people vying for fewer and fewer resources, the importance of working towards the critical societies conceived by Socrates becomes increasingly more apparent. Socrates was hoping for something better than the narrow pursuit of vested interests so common among human groups today. He thought that people should and should participate in the creation of reasonable, just societies, and that the development of the individual mind was essential to the rational pursuit of knowledge. He thought the goal of education should be to teach so that students learn to value the importance of living an examined life. He believed that education inherently entails the seeking of truth, wherever that truth might lead you. And he was especially concerned with the problem of sophistc thinking – skilled thinking designed to serve selfish or vested interest, or in other words unethical critical thinking.

Why then, more than 2,000 years after Socrates has come and gone, are we still so far from the realisation of critical societies? I think the short answer is that although humans naturally reason, we don’t naturally reason well. We don’t automatically and effortlessly reason with skill and discipline, with concern for the rights and needs of others, with intellectual humility and integrity. And we aren’t doing enough to move in this
direction. What we are doing is hit and miss, scattered bits of logical thought and action, but not enough to create a reasonable world.

At the same time, we think our thinking is fine. To detect problems in our thinking requires that we concern ourselves with the problematics in thought. It requires understanding the mind, where and how it tends to go wrong, and how we can intervene to set it right when it does.

In essence, we need the tools of critical thinking if we are to effectively cultivate the Socratic spirit, for it is through these tools that we can emulate the best thinking of Socrates. To understand the relationship between the Socratic method and critical thinking, a good place to start is through analysing the Socratic dialogues themselves, for a close examination reveals the concepts and principles, skills, abilities and traits of critical thinking. Consider the following few examples from Plato’s Socratic dialogues:

Socrates routinely delineated important concepts by focusing disciplined inquiry on such questions as:

| "What is justice?" (The Republic) |
| "What is courage?" (The Laches) |
| "What is knowledge?" (The Theaetetus) |
| "What is piety and what is impiety?" (Euthyphro). |

Socrates focused on keeping the thinking of others relevant when they seemed to be wandering from the question or deliberately avoiding answering the question:

In the Theaetetus, Socrates asks “What is knowledge?” And having been told that it is geometry and shoemaking and so forth, he replies, “You were not asked what things there is knowledge of, nor how many sorts of knowledge there are... but I asked you how to count the sorts of knowledge but to know what knowledge itself is.”

Socrates asks Euthyphro to tell him the meaning of piety, and when Euthyphro strays from the question, Socrates replies with: “Just at present I would rather hear from you a more precise answer, which you have not as yet given, my friend, to the question, What is ‘piety?’”

Again, when Euthyphro strays from the question, Socrates attempts to keep the thinking on track: “Remember that I did not ask you to give me two or three examples of piety, but to explain the general idea which makes all pius things to be pious.”

Socrates displayed and encouraged intellectual humility:

When Euthyphro says he knows how the gods behave, Socrates says, “as you who are well informed about their approval of them, I cannot do better than assert to your superior wisdom. For what else can I say, confessing as I do, that I know nothing of them?”

In Meno, Socrates says ‘how can you know whether a thing is good or bad of which you are wholly ignorant?”

Socrates questioned the logic or truth of conventional beliefs:

When Euthyphro details the behaviour of the gods, Socrates says, “And do you really

2 All reasoning is an attempt to figure something out, to settle some question, to solve some problem. What question are you trying to answer? Are there other ways to think about the question? Can you divide the question into sub-questions? Does this question require judgment rather than facts alone? What intellectual tools are entailed in this question?

3 All reasoning is based on assumptions. What assumptions are you making? Are they justified? How are your assumptions shaping your points of view? Which of your assumptions might reasonably be questioned?

4 All reasoning is done from some point of view. What is your point of view? What insights is it based on? What are its weaknesses? What other points of view should be considered in reasoning through this problem? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these viewpoints? Are you fair-mindedly considering the insights behind these viewpoints?

5 All reasoning is based on data, information, and evidence. To what extent is your reasoning supported by relevant data? Do the data suggest explanations that differ from those you have given? How clear, accurate and relevant are the data to the question at issue? Have you gathered data sufficient to reach a reasonable conclusion?

Universal structures of thought

8. To answer a question or solve a problem
7. Based on concepts and theories
6. To make inferences and judgments
5. To define terms and distinguish and explain
4. To organize data, facts and experiences
3. To use data, facts and experiences
2. To use concepts and theories
1. To use concepts and theories

"We shall be better and braver if we think that we ought to inquire than if we indulge in the fancy that there was no use in seeking to know what we do not know."

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6 All reasoning is expressed through and shaped by concepts and theories.
What key concepts and theories are guiding your reasoning?
What alternative explanations might be possible, given these concepts and theories?
Are you clear about the concepts you are using in your reasoning?
Are you distorting ideas to fit your agenda?

7 All reasoning contains inferences or interpretations by which we draw conclusions and give meaning to data.
To what extent do the data support your conclusions?
Are your inferences consistent with each other?
Are there other reasonable inferences that should be considered?

8 All reasoning leads somewhere or has implications and consequences.
What implications and consequences follow from your reasoning?
If you accept this line of reasoning, what implications or consequences are likely?

Intellectual traits or dispositions
Socrates was concerned not only with analysing and assessing thought, but also with fostering intellectual traits. Consider the following intellectual traits and some questions that, when pursued by students, cultivate intellectual traits or virtues:

Intellectual humility is knowledge of ignorance, sensitivity to what you know and what you do not know. It means being aware of your biases, prejudices, self-deceptive tendencies and the limitations of your viewpoint. Questions that foster intellectual humility include:
What do I really know (about myself, about the situation, about another person, about my nation, about what is going on in the world)?
To what extent do my prejudices or biases influence my thinking?
To what extent have I been indoctrinated into beliefs that may be false?
How do beliefs I have accepted uncritically keep me from seeing things as they are?

Intellectual empathy is awareness of the need to entertain views that differ from our own, especially those we strongly disagree with. It is needed to accurately reconstruct the viewpoints and reasoning of our opponents and to reason from premises, assumptions and ideas other than our own. Questions that foster intellectual empathy include:
To what extent do I accurately represent viewpoints I disagree with?
Can I summarise the views of my opponents to their satisfaction? Can I see insights in the views of others and prejudices in my own?
Do I sympathise with the feelings of others in light of their thinking differently than me?

Intellectual integrity consists in holding yourself to the same intellectual standards you expect others to honour. Questions that foster intellectual integrity include:
Do I behave in accordance with what I say I believe, or do I tend to say one thing and do another?
To what extent do I expect the same of myself as I expect of others?
To what extent are there contradictions or inconsistencies in my life?
To what extent do I strive to recognise and eliminate self-deception in my life?

Confidence in reason is based on the belief that one's own higher interests and those of humankind at large are best served by giving the freest play to reason. It means using standards of reasonability as the fundamental criteria by which to judge whether to accept or reject any belief or position. Questions that foster confidence in reason include:
Am I willing to change my position when the evidence leads to a more reasonable position?
Do I adhere to principles of sound reasoning when persuading others of my position, or do I distort matters to support my position?
Do I deem it more important to "win" an argument or to see the issue from the most reasonable perspective?
Do I encourage others to come to their own conclusions, or do I try to force my views on them?

Intellectual autonomy is thinking for oneself while adhering to standards of rationality. It means working through issues using one's own thinking rather than uncritically accepting the viewpoints of others. Questions that foster intellectual autonomy are:
To what extent am I a conformist?
To what extent do I uncritically accept what I am told by my government, the media, my peers?
Do I think through issues on my own, or do I merely accept the views of others?
Having thought through an issue from a rational perspective, am I willing to stand alone despite the irrational criticisms of others?

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