
The Socratic Method

The method which Socrates employed in his philosophical analyses had five distinct characteristics.



Fives Steps in the Socratic Method

- ◆ Skeptical
- ◆ Conversational
- ◆ Conceptual or definitional
- ◆ Empirical or inductive
- ◆ Deductive

Skeptical

- ◆ Real or professed ignorance of the truth of the matter under discussion.
- ◆ This is the Socratic irony which seemed to some of his listeners an insincere pretense, but which was undoubtedly an expression of Socrates' genuine intellectual humility.
- ◆ Socrates skepticism is shared with the Sophists and, in his adoption of it, he may very well have been influenced by them.
- ◆ Sophistic skepticism was definitive and final, but the Socratic is tentative and provisional;
- ◆ Socrates' doubt and assumed ignorance is an indispensable first step in the pursuit of knowledge.

Conversational

- ◆ Dialogue not only as a didactic device, but is a technique for the actual discovery of opinions amongst men, there are truths upon which all men can agree, Socrates proceeds to unfold such truths by discussion or by question and answer.
- ◆ Beginning with a popular or hastily formed conception proposed by one of the members of the company or taken from the poets or some other traditional source, Socrates subjects this notion to severe criticism, as a result of which a more adequate conception emerges.
- ◆ His method, in this aspect, is often described as the maieutic method. It is the art of intellectual midwifery, which brings other men's ideas to birth. It is also known as the dialectical method or the method of elenchus.

Conceptual or Definitional

- ◆ Sets as the goal of knowledge the acquisition of concepts, such as the ethical concepts of justice, piety, wisdom, courage and the like.
- ◆ Socrates tacitly assumes that truth is embodied in correct definition. Precise definition of terms is held to be the first step in the problem solving process.

Empirical or inductive

- ◆ The proposed definitions are criticized by reference to particular instances.
- ◆ Socrates always tested definitions by recourse to common experience and to general usages.

Deductive

- ◆ A given definition is tested by drawing out its implications, by deducing its consequences.
- ◆ The definitional method of Socrates is a real contribution to the logic of philosophical inquiry.
- ◆ It inspired the dialectical method of Plato and exerted a not inconsiderable influence on the logic Aristotle.