4. How and Why to Analogize Socratic Questioning to Zen Buddhist Koan Practice

Stephanie E. Hake
University of Minnesota Twin Cities
United States
E-Mail: stehake@gmail.com
ORCID iD http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4956-8572

Abstract:

The nature and aim of Socrates' philosophical method is a contested matter in ancient philosophy scholarship. Among scholars who believe that there is a coherent method in Plato's dialogues, it is generally agreed that Socrates' method is a practice that aims to elicit something by way of question and answer. I, among others, believe that something to be a transformation (in the sense of an awakening) on the part of the interlocutor to his own ignorance and conceit of knowledge. Instead of pointing to Plato's dialogues for evidence in order to argue for this, I analogize the method and aim of Socratic Questioning to Zen Buddhist koan practice.

Keywords:
Socrates' philosophical method; Socratic Questioning; Zen Buddhist koan practice

The nature and aim of Socrates' philosophical method is a contested matter in ancient philosophy scholarship (Wolfsdorf 2013). Among scholars who believe that there is a coherent method in Plato's dialogues, it is generally agreed that Socrates' method is a practice that aims to elicit something by way of question and answer. Various scholars take the *something* being elicited as (1) objective definitional truth (essentially an answer to his question) (Wolfsdorf 2013); (2) admission that the interlocutor holds logically contradictory beliefs (Tarrant 2002); or, (3) a transformation (in the sense of an awakening) on the part of the interlocutor to his own ignorance and conceit of knowledge (Benson 2000). I am convinced that Socrates aims for something like (3). To pursue an end like this, scholars typically look to texts like Plato's dialogues for literary evidence of Socrates' self-reports and behavior (Socrates the literary figure of Plato's dialogues and not Socrates the historical person).[1] While I will provide some textual analysis of Socrates' self-reports and behavior in Plato's dialogues, I wish to argue for my thesis largely by drawing an analogy between Socratic philosophizing and Zen Buddhist koan practice, as this is how I perceive what's going on in the dialogues.

Koan practice is a practice of question and answer that is motivated by the quest for awakening. To clarify, a koan is an enigmatic expression based upon a dialogical encounter between a Zen teacher and his/her student that was historically (and still is) used as a pedagogical tool for training in the Zen Buddhist tradition (Heine and Wright 3). On the face of it, an analogy between these two methods of attaining wisdom might seem dubious or unmotivated. After all, koan practice is highly resistant to objective, rational analysis and further, intentionally disables logical reasoning to achieve awakening. However, for the many points of contrast between the Western philosophy of Socrates and the Eastern philosophy of Zen Buddhist koan practice, there are interesting points of comparison in their methods.[2] My hope is that drawing an analogy between these two philosophical methods will give us a unique vantage point on Socrates' self-reports and behavior, perhaps lending

[1] Very little is known about the historical person, Socrates, and what is known about him is drawn primarily from his contemporaries. In this paper, I narrow my discussion to Socrates the literary figure in Plato's dialogues. See Debra Nails (1999) for discussion on the topic of whether and to what degree Plato attempts to represent Socrates the historical figure.

[2] The question of whether the ancient Greeks had ever been influenced by Buddhism, or just Eastern traditions in general, is a very interesting one indeed, especially given that Socrates was born in 469 B.C.E.—approximately nineteen years before Buddha was born in 450 B.C.E.! In "When Socrates met the Buddha: Greek and Indian Dialectic in Hellenistic Bactria and India", David Sick discusses the first major historical interaction between Eastern and Western traditions. His analysis of proverbs on the asceticism of silence traces themes from India and Bactria to "numerous Hellenic outlets" (275). I direct the interested reader to Sick (2007).

support to the idea that the aim of Socrates' method is to awaken his interlocutor to his own ignorance and conceit of knowledge.

The Aim of Socrates' Philosophizing

Let me give some context in the scholarly literature for the problem of the aim of Socrates' philosophical method. Gregory Vlastos (1983) proposed the problem of the elenchus. The term "elenchus" is Latin for the Greek term "elenchos", which translates to English as "refutation". The problem of the elenchus is thus the problem of the refutation. The central problem is: what is the nature of Socrates' refutation of an interlocutor's claim? Specifically, Vlastos' research question was: how does Socrates *refute* an interlocutor's claim if all that he has shown is that it is inconsistent with a set of premises that the interlocutor has agreed to? As evidence, Vlastos cites a conversation between Socrates and Polus in the *Gorgias* where Polus has agreed to a set of premises that are inconsistent with one another, but where Socrates thinks that something more has been shown, namely, that Polus' original thesis has been refuted (*Gorgias* 479e). All Socrates has shown, according to Vlastos, is that it cannot be the case that Polus' original thesis in conjunction with the premise set is true.

One solution, to give an example, was to say that Socrates shows that his interlocutor's thesis is *self*-contradictory, i.e., the idiosyncratic senses that the interlocutor attributes to the words in his thesis are inconsistent (Forster 9). Another solution is to say that the problem of the elenchus is a "mere artifact" of modern ancient Greek philosophy scholarship; there can be no solution to Vlastos' *problem of the refutation* because there is no refutation in the first place (Brickhouse and Smith 147). A third response is to simply reject that Socrates aims to "refute" his interlocutor's claims and instead to argue that Socrates aims to "test" the interlocutor himself. For example, Tarrant (2002) argues that "elenchos" refers to a competition among rivals, which is something that Socrates rarely if never describes himself as doing (68). Rather than characterize the practice as an "elenchos", we should characterize it as "exetesis", which translates from Greek to "testing" (72). "Exetasis" is less adversarial and more cooperative than "elenchos". Contrary to "elenchos", we have evidence in the dialogues (esp. the *Apology*, which I will detail later) that (1) "Socrates represents himself as a friend and benefactor of those being examined, not their opponent", and (2) that "exetasis" is "specifically associated with the examination of the extent of somebody's knowledge" (Tarrant 72). Hopefully it is clear that these two terms imply the presence of starkly different perspectives on Socrates' practice of question

and answer. This final response to the problem of the refutation is of the type I find most compelling, and which frames my discussion of Socrates in this paper.

If Vlastos is mistaken and Socrates doesn't aim to "refute" his interlocutor's thesis, then what is he attempting to do in his practice of question and answer? One view is that Socrates' primary aim is to attain (definitional) truth, and so he views his engagement with his interlocutors as cooperative pursuits of truth (Wolfsdorf 2003). A second view is that Socrates' primary aim is to "test" his interlocutor (recall "exetasis") to expose both inconsistency and lack of knowledge so as to provoke and encourage his pursuit of knowledge (Tarrant 2002). A third view is that Socrates primarily aims to expose inconsistency among his interlocutor's ethical beliefs in order to undermine his interlocutor's conceit of knowledge (Benson 2000). In favor of this third view, Hugh Benson writes, "whatever else the Socratic method can or must be able to accomplish, it must be able to test whether someone knows what he is reputed (by himself or others) to know (17). These three authors have provides alternatives for what Socrates might be doing other than "refuting" the interlocutor's claims. Turn to the next section, where I will give some general textual evidence in favor of the idea that Socrates is "testing" his interlocutors rather than "refuting" his interlocutors' claims.[3]

Socrates and the Early, Aporetic Dialogues

Most scholars agree that Plato's earliest dialogues are "almost invariably" aporetic (Frede 210). The early dialogues are the ones that I will focus on in this paper.[4] "Aporia" is a state of "irresolvable internal contradiction or logical disjunction". It comes from the Greek *aporos* (the prefix *a-* means "without" and the noun *poros* means "passage". *Aporos* is to be without passage, e.g., an impasse). The aporetic dialogues end in situations where "we not longer know what to say about the question at issue, how to get out of the difficulty presented by the contradiction between the original claim and the conclusion of the ensuing argument. To be more precise, it is the respondent in the dialogue who is reduced to *aporia*" (Frede 210). Consider this following dialogue between Meno and Socrates:

[3] A disclaimer: that is not to say that all three authors mentioned in this paragraph cited this particular textual evidence as supporting their positions; this is textual evidence I find thought provoking for thinking about Socrates' practice of question and answer.

[4] The topic of which dialogues make up the early ones is sometimes contested. Plato scholar Richard Kraut (2013) says that the following are early dialogues: *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, and *Protagoras*.

> MENO: Well now, my dear Socrates, you are just like what I always heard before I met you: always puzzled yourself and puzzling everybody else. And now you seem to me to be a regular wizard, you dose me with drugs and bewitch me with charms and spells, and drown me in puzzledom. I'll tell you just what you are like, if you will forgive a little jest: your looks and the rest of you are exactly like a flatfish and you sting like this stingray—only go near and touch one of those fish and you go numb, and that is the sort of thing you seem to have done to me. Really and truly, my soul is numb and my mouth is numb, and what to answer you I do not know. […]
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> SOCRATES: […] Well, if this stingray is numb itself as well as making other numb, I am like it; if not, I am not. For I am not clear-headed myself when I make other puzzled, but I am as puzzled as puzzled can be, and thus I make others puzzled too. (80b-d)

After proposing answers to the question, *what is the nature of virtue?*, and being refuted by Socrates multiple times, Meno charges Socrates with the offense of making his soul and mouth numb as a stingray numbs its perceived offenders. Given the influential role that oratory played in the social and political life in fifth-century Greece, this charge carries a lot of weight (Zehl *x*).[5] Socrates is commonly accused of reducing his interlocutors into "puzzledom", otherwise called aporia. Some interlocutors in Plato's dialogues and contemporary readers have come to conclude from this kind of interaction and others (e.g., Socrates in *Gorgias* (458a-b)) that Socrates is a condescending, coercive bully. For one reason why we shouldn't conclude this, consider what happens later in the dialogue between Socrates and Meno's slave boy.

Socrates engages Meno's slave boy by questioning him about geometric figures. There is an important caveat about this example worth mentioning up front: the example of the slave boy is actually supposed to show Meno that what we call learning is actually

[5] In fifth-century Athens, political decisions were made by the vote of the membership of the Assembly, the Council, and the law courts. Anyone who had the right to and who was also skilled at speaking had the opportunity to influence deliberation and outcome in the direction of their own interests. For this reason, oratory was a powerful skill to have (Zehl *x*).

remembering ("anamnesis" is the idea that the soul is eternal, knows everything, and only needs to recollect in order to learn (SparkNotes Editors)). I don't see any reason why this—the fact that the slave boy is supposed to be remembering rather than learning—should give us reason for thinking he is not in a state of aporia upon failing to answer Socrates' question correctly. Socrates engages the youth in a series of questions about geometry to which he replies with answers. Eventually, the slave boy replies with an answer "nine" that is inconsistent a previous answer "eight". Upon realizing that the two answers cannot both be right, the youth becomes confused. Socrates' questioning has numbed him into puzzledom. Socrates turns to Meno to explain why being numbed is a positive rather than a negative effect:

> SOCRATES: […] At first he did not know what line made the eight-foot space, and he does not know yet; but he thought he knew then, and boldly answered as if he did know, and did not think there was any doubt; now he thinks here is a doubt, and as he does not know, so he does not think he does know.
>
> MENO: Quite True.
>
> SOCRATES: Then he is better off as regards the matter he did not know?
>
> MENO: Yes, I think so too.
>
> SOCRATES: So now we have put him into a difficulty, and like the stingray we have made him numb, have we done him any harm?
>
> MENO: I don't think so.
>
> SOCRATES: At least we have brought him a step onwards, as it seems, to find out how he stands. For now he would go on contentedly seeking, since he does not know; but then he could easily have thought he would be talking well about the double space, even before any number of people again and again, saying how it must have been a line of double length.
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> MENO: It seems so.

SOCRATES: Then do you think he would have tried to find out or to learn what he thought he knew, not knowing, until he tumbled into a difficulty by thinking he did not know, and longed to know?

MENO: I do not think he would, Socrates.

SOCRATES: So he gained by being numbed?

MENO: I think so. (84a-c)

Socrates gets Meno to see how having a numb soul and mouth is not necessarily an offense, but rather is a positive thing: it thrust the slave boy into a state of aporia. Now, rather than thinking that he knows the answer, when he does not, the slave boy has been humbled and will tend to seek out the answers open mindedly. The implication, I think, is that the youth has undergone a subtle change of disposition as a result of being numbed by Socrates' questioning, one which makes him more self-reflective and humble. The aporetic dialogues thus "lead the respondent by an argument to come to see the ignorance out of which he made some claim" (Frede 210).

The dialogue continues with Socrates and Meno discussing the nature of virtue. After discussing several different claims that lead to no definition of virtue, Socrates declares that it is time for him to go. All of the characters—not to mention the reader!—leave the exchange in a state of aporia about the nature of virtue.[6] Whereas the "expert" Meno began the dialogue full of confidence, because defining virtue is "nothing difficult" (71e), he leaves the dialogue having been unable to give a faultless account of the nature of virtue, rendering his status as "expert" dubious (although it is unclear from the dialogue

[6] When discussing why Plato published dialogues in the question and answer form that he did, Richard Kraut (2013) writes, "The only plausible way of answering that question is to say that these dialogues were intended by Plato to be devices by which he might induce the audience for which they are intended to reflect on and accept the arguments and conclusions offered by his principle interlocutor […] The educative value of written texts is thus explicitly acknowledged by Plato's dominant speaker. If preludes can educate a whole citizenry that is prepared to learn from them, then surely Plato thinks that other sorts of written texts—for example, his own dialogues—can also serve an educative function." The idea here is that the reader participates as a sort of passive interlocutor, learning from the arguments and conclusions drawn by the principle interlocutor. In the early, aporetic dialogues, the reader leaves in a state of aporia just like the interlocutors.

whether Meno has undergone a change of disposition as a result of being numbed by Socrates' questioning).[7]

Analysis of Socrates in the *Apology*

In the previous section, I briefly discussed the concept of aporia in relation to Plato's early dialogues. I also gave an example of an aporetic dialogue. This was to provide very general textual evidence in favor of the idea that Socrates is "testing" his interlocutors rather than "refuting" his interlocutors' claims. Let us turn now to the *Apology* for an analysis of what Socrates reports that he is doing with his practice of question and answer—for another reason why we should avoid thinking that Socrates is a condescending, coercive bully.

The *Apology* is a unique dialogue because it is where Socrates the literary character reveals his motivations and position to the public on the topic of how best to live one's life.[8]

[7] Brookhouse and Smith (2000) point out that it frequently occurs where interlocutors abandon their original claims but fail to undergo a change of disposition, e.g., Euthyphro in *Euthyphro*, Polus and Callicles in *Gorgias*, and Thrasymachus in *Republic* (69). Others like Beversluis (2000) have rejected this "pro-Socratic" picture painted by the literature where many interlocutors are reduced to aporia, but yet stubbornly refuse to acknowledge Socrates' criticisms, only to "return to the workaday world unchanged" (1). He undertakes to provide a sympathetic analysis of the interlocutors' justifications for their beliefs in the dialogues, rather than one of Socrates.

[8] As a tangential aside (see footnote one), whereas most of the dialogues are plagued by the distinction between Socrates the historical figure and Socrates the character in Plato's dialogues, the *Apology* is plagued less so:

> *"if, as is generally believed, the* Apology *was written not long after the event, many Athenians would remember the actual speech, and it would be a poor way to vindicate the Master, which is the obvious intent, to put a completely different speech in his mouth.* […] *The beauty of language and style is certainly Plato's, but the serene spiritual and moral beauty of character belongs to Socrates*" (23).

This is a passage from *Apology* translator G.M.A. Grube. This is a relevant but not decisive reason for why modern readers can regard the views expressed in the *Apology* as (at least) similar in spirit to those held by the historical Socrates. This fact does not settle the debate about the historical Socrates versus Plato's character Socrates by any measure, but it enables us henceforth to rely upon Plato's depiction of Socrates in the *Apology* for Socrates on the practice and nature of practical wisdom.

It is where we find the famous Socratic proverb: "the unexamined life is not worth living" (38a). In the *Apology*, Socrates explains the motive behind his method: he lives in "assistance of" and in the "service of" the god (23b). He begins his defense narrating about his friend from youth, Chairephon, who went to the oracle at Delphi, inquiring if anyone was wiser than Socrates (21a). The oracle replied that no one was wiser. This reply perplexed Socrates because he both did not think that he was knowledgeable and did not believe that the oracle would be lying (21b). Thus, Socrates began his practice of question and answer with every person reputed for wisdom in order to provide a counterexample to the oracular pronouncement, i.e., to vindicate himself of the claim to wisdom (21c-d).

In her chapter, "Socrates in the *Apology*", Sandra Peterson explains that while he initially thought the oracular pronouncement might be a compliment, he concludes that the adjective "wise" to be a great slander (19). Her analysis unfolds as follows. In his quest to refute the oracle, he found that those with the higher reputations for being wise (e.g., politicians) were the most deficient, and those with the lower reputations for being wise (e.g., ordinary people) were "more fit in regard to being thoughtful" (22a).[9] Socrates' claim suggests a disconnect between *sophia*, knowledge, and *phronêsis*, thought. Peterson cites a couple of reasons in the text as support for this disconnect (see footnote nine).[10] Socrates

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[9] The translation of "thoughtful" in this passage has often been translated as "knowledgeable". Peterson's argument turns on the way that the two terms are translated. Her reasoning is that, in the particular setting of the *Apology*, *phronêsis* and being *phronimos* seem to be different from *sophia*: "*Sophia* involves a claim to some important knowledge, and there isn't evidence that *phronêsis* does" (personal correspondence with Peterson)). Some of her reasons for thinking this include the ones I list in the paragraph of this footnote.

[10] Socrates explains that the teachers of virtue and the reputed wise (e.g., politicians) are "wise with a wisdom more than human; else I cannot explain it, for I certainly do not possess it" (20d-e). In this passage, Socrates draws a distinction between human wisdom and divine wisdom. Human wisdom is characterized by not thinking that he knows something when he actually does not know it (21d); it is thus the absence of false belief. This kind of wisdom is "worth little or nothing" (23b). Socrates says, "surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know" (29b). By contrast, divine wisdom is positive knowledge about the world, e.g., natural phenomena dealing with the skies and below the earth (Socrates' reason for being prosecuted) (19b). The distinction between *sophia* and *phronêsis* is valuable because it explains how Socrates is able to be humanly wise without also being divinely wise. Building on this, Socrates reproaches people who do not care for *phronêsis*, which amounts to him urging

also finds that those with a reputation for wisdom think themselves to be wisest among human beings also about "the other things" (22d), which are later described as "the biggest things" (22d). Peterson infers that "the biggest things" are matters concerning how people might best conduct their lives (22). This means that those people who are most deficient in fitness for being "thoughtful" are the same people who think themselves to be the wisest about how people might best conduct their lives. Their reputed wisdom *caused them to be mistaken* about their level of knowledge concerning the biggest things. Because Socrates reveals preference not to be "wise" in the manner of the reputed wise—"it was to my [Socrates'] advantage to be as I am"—we can deduce that he believes that being labeled "wise", and thus being classed with the most deficient in being "thoughtful", is a slander (22e).

Peterson's translation of *phronimos* to "thoughtful" rather than "knowledgeable" allows her to draw some further conclusions about Socrates in the *Apology*. For example, she points out that caring about the best way to live one's life is different than knowing about it because the former requires *thoughtfulness* and the latter does not (33). Consider Socrates' exchange with Meletus in the *Apology*. When Socrates exposes Meletus' inconsistent beliefs in front of the jury, he remains complacent and unresponsive to Socrates' charge (26b). Peterson assesses, "failure of a Socratic examination, if accompanied by a troubled and humbled reaction, might be exactly what did reveal your care and thoughtfulness" (32). Meletus' utter failure to be troubled about the contradiction in his beliefs reveals his lack of care.

So whereas Socrates originally questioned the Oracle's declaration, he begins to accept that he may be wise in a certain way, namely, just insofar as he is humanly wise: he does not think he knows that which he does not know (see footnote nine). In addition to the fact that he may be humanly wise, "he evidently considers himself to care about how to live and to be thoughtful about how to live" (Peterson 34). A further conclusion is that false belief about one's knowledge is an obstacle to being thoughtful (34). Thus, "acknowledging ignorance is necessary for constant examination. […] One cannot desire to get one's soul into the best state possible if one thinks it is already in the best state. One cannot then care about virtue" (35). And finally:

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them to care for it (29d-e). It would be incoherent for Socrates to urge people to aim for *phronêsis* if he thought it was the same thing as *sophia*.

> "Their [the reputed wise] mistake is to think that they have the god-like ability to teach people how best to live. It is a big mistake because it is a mistake about the most important thing for people to care about. […] Moreover, because to bear the label 'wise' causes the defect that those who bear it are least fit for being thoughtful, those reputed wise can transmit a very bad condition when they pretend to teach others their wisdom. Their students, now believing themselves wise about the biggest things, will themselves be less fit for being thoughtful about their lives than before being taught" (35).

In this passage, Peterson clarifies a consequence of knowledge over thoughtfulness: those who believe they are wise pass on the defect of complacency to their students. One implication of this view is that the disposition to be thoughtful is important for pedagogy purposes. Given that we typically want students to have teachers who make them more fit for being thoughtful than less fit, it follows on Socrates' view that personally valuing care and thoughtfulness about how best to live one's life rather than knowledge of important matters is a necessary condition for being a teacher at all, much less an influential teacher.

What to conclude from Peterson's analysis? For the purpose of the analogy I am going to draw, I wish to extrapolate upon a couple of points that Peterson concludes from her analysis of Socrates' self-reports and behavior in the *Apology*. First, Socrates finally accepts the oracular pronouncement on the grounds that human wisdom isn't necessarily about knowledge of important matters, but rather is about a disposition to be thoughtful. Since he considers himself thoughtful about how best to live one's life, he may indeed be "wise" in a way after all. Second, conceit of knowledge is an obstacle to having a disposition to be thoughtful. If we wish to cultivate a disposition to be thoughtful, then we must rid ourselves of such conceit. Thus, she writes, acknowledging our ignorance about the greatest matters is a necessary aspect to cultivating a disposition to be thoughtful.

Zen Buddhist Koan Practice

"At the root of great awakening is great doubt" – Zen saying

Zen is a variety of Buddhism. Zen's unique teaching is that awakening can come to any dedicated layperson and that it may occur suddenly and intuitively—not necessarily requiring years of study and concentration (Peter Pauper Press 6). Being awakened in Zen is not a rational

(in the sense of algorithmic) or methodological process. Rather, it is non-rational and intuitive, which often makes it difficult to explain in language (hence the utter absence of pedagogical books on how to be a Zen teacher). Zen meditation, called *zazen*, and koan practice are designed to put the Zen student in a state where he or she can "abandon logic and make the leap upward into enlightenment" (Peter Pauper Press 6). In an awakened state, the Zen student loses the concept of self and becomes aware that everything in the world is at the same time impermanent and eternal—impermanent because it will lose its form eventually and eternal because everything, no matter its form, is always part of everything that exists. Years ago, when I was a student in his classroom, Zen master Seido Ray Ronci explained this concept in terms of pouring water into a colander: each water molecule becomes an individual upon being strained, but they all inevitably return to the same body after moving through the colander that they amassed before doing so.

Zen master Shunryu Suzuki gave a series of highly influential talks upon coming to North America from Japan in the 1960's. His talks were recorded and compiled into a book, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, which has served as a foundational book in the West for North Americans interested in Zen Buddhism. In it he discusses what it means to be a Zen practitioner with regard to Zen themes such as: beginner's mind, non-ego, emptiness, mindfulness, and non-duality. It will help my cause to discuss some of these themes briefly. Suzuki explains that the goal of practice is always to keep our beginner's mind, which is boundless and empty, because "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few" (21). In short, his argument is: the more that we become experts in something, the more that we tend to limit ourselves by thinking of ourselves as experts. Because our selves are, in fact, limit-*less*, we do ourselves great cognitive disservice by straying from beginner's mind. The practice of cultivating dispositional traits, like mindfulness and humility, is key to performing every act with a beginner's mind. Suzuki writes,

> "Concentration should be present in our thinking. This is mindfulness. [...] Mindfulness is, at the same time, wisdom. By wisdom, we do not mean some particular faculty or philosophy. It is the readiness of the mind that is wisdom. So wisdom could be various philosophies and teachings, and various kinds of research and studies. But we should not become attached to some particular wisdom, such as that which was taught by the Buddha. Wisdom is not something to learn. Wisdom is something which will come out of your mindfulness. So the point is to be ready for observing things, and to be ready for thinking. This is called emptiness of your mind" (115).

In this passage, Suzuki explains what wisdom is and how it is acquired. Wisdom is a product of mindfulness, which is the state of mind acquired by intense and chronic

concentration on the present moment. Practicing concentration on the present moment by observing and having a "ready" mind encourages mindfulness, which in turn leads to wisdom.

Now that I've introduced some basic themes in Zen Buddhism, I am in a position to introduce the concept of koan practice in the Zen tradition. Koan practice is a pedagogical tool used by a Zen teacher for two purposes: (1) as I mentioned just now, to awaken the Zen student by "frustrat[ing] the discursive intellect"; (2) to measure the student's progress and/or suitability for dharma transmission, which effectively establishes that student as a successor of a particular spiritual lineage (Foulk 38). Westerners often describe koans as nonsensical riddles. Consider the following koan: "the master holds up a stick and dares his disciples, 'If you call this a stick you will be clinging; if you do not call this a stick you are ignoring [the obvious]. So, now, tell me, what do you call it?' " (Heine and Wright 4).[11] Far from being random, nonsensical riddles, Professor of Religion T. Griffith Foulk explains that koans are simply brief sayings, dialogues, or anecdotes that have been excerpted from biographies and discourse records of past Zen masters that are held up for scrutiny—a scrutiny that *always* involves interpreting and commenting on a passage in question (16). She writes that the passage in question is assumed to be an "encapsulation of the awakened mind" of the Zen master and a "direct expression of ultimate truth". Koan practice entails using the passage in question as an object of "intense mental concentration" in conjunction with seated meditation (37).[12]

Foulk describes the traditional way of koan practice. A koan is typically composed of a root case. A root case is understood to be a verbatim quotation of an ancient Zen master, which takes the form of a dialogue between a Zen master and an interlocutor (usually his student) who serves as a foil for a demonstration of the Zen master's wit and insight.

> "The [root case] is said to be ideal as a starting point [for a Zen student doing koan practice] because it quickly frustrates discursive reasoning about the meaning of the case and enables the meditator to enter into a state of intense mental concentration. When, after an extended period of effort, the mind freezes into a single, all encompassing 'ball of doubt' [...] that is

[11] Here and elsewhere (except where I have scholarly exegesis to lean on) I will not presume ability to explain the koan.

[12] There is some disagreement about the role of koan practice in Zen Buddhism between the Soto and Rinzai schools. While I won't treat this issue in my paper, it has relevance insofar as Rinzai schools tend to give both koan practice and seated meditation equal priority while Soto schools emphasize seated meditation above koan practice. This means that I might inevitably, accidentally be discussing Rinzai schools specifically in my paper rather than Zen in general.

> focused on the [root case] conditions are ripe for a sudden flash of insight into [the Zen master's intent], which is to say, the awakened mind from which [the Zen master's reply] originally emerged. When that happens, as the traditional understanding would have it, the practitioner is suddenly able to comment freely and incisively on the root case" (37).

When a student is capable of commenting freely and incisively on a koan, the student is seen as breaking through the intellectual impasse with an awakening of his or her own. At this point, koan practice is used not just to awaken the Zen student by frustrating the discursive intellect, but to measure the student's progress and/or suitability for dharma transmission.

Koans constitute a literary genre with unspoken conventions.[13] Here, the convention is that the voice of the Zen master always represents the standpoint of awakening, speaks with the greatest authority, and occupies the position of judge. By contrast, the voice of the interlocutor or student represents delusion, striving for awakening, or awakened insight rivaling that of the master, but it is always in the inferior position of being evaluated by the voice of the master. The dialogue between the Zen master and interlocutor or student is (1) recorded, (2) commented upon by other Zen masters (who now have authority over the ancient master and serve as judges of the dialogue), (3) eventually included in a koan collection. Then, the root case itself serves as a foil for the commenting master's critical verse in much the same way that, within the case, the interlocutor provides a foil for the words of the ancient master.

Consider this famous koan (translated by Foulk) from *Hsüeh-t'ou's Verses on One Hundred Old Cases* as an example of a root case and commentary by a Zen master:

> "Raised (chü):
>
> At Nan-ch'üan [monastery] one day, the [monks of the] east and west halls were arguing over a cat. When Nan-ch'üan saw this, he held it up and said, 'if you can speak, I will not cut it in two.' The assembly had no reply. [Nan-] Ch'üan cut the cat into two pieces.

[13] Here's more on literary conventions. Without such conventions, koans would have little psychological power to function because "what identifies words or actions as 'expressions of the mental state of enlightened people' is never the semantic content of the words themselves, but only their attribution to a Ch'an patriarch [Zen master] in a flame history biography, a discourse record, or (subsequently) a koan collection" (39). Being attributed to a Zen master makes koans powerful because they are taken to be direct expressions of ultimate truth. Without this attribution to a Zen master, the koan would no longer seem profound, but rather would be utterly mundane and unremarkable.

> [Hsüeh-t'ou's] verse (*sung*) says:
> Both halls alike are confused Ch'an [Zen] monks,
> kicking up all that smoke and dust for no purpose.
> Fortunately, Nan-ch'üan could make a decisive judgment;
> with a single slice he cut it into two pieces, however uneven they might be.

The first paragraph is the root case and the second is Zen master Hsüeh-t'ou's verse commentary upon the root case. For the sake of space, I won't give examples of further commentaries upon Hsüeh-t'ou's interpretation of the root case, although Foulk includes several in his essay (see pg. 29-30). This process of Zen masters commenting on root cases and commentaries by previous Zen masters is a continuous one.

The Analogy between Socratic Philosophizing and Koan Practice

Hopefully it is not too difficult a task to see where these two practices of question and answer and their respective orientating philosophies overlap. I have taken note of four main points of comparison.

First, *both practices lead the interlocutor to aporia, which is supposed to lead to an awakening* of some kind. For example, in the *Meno*, Socrates questions Meno's slave boy until he becomes numbed into puzzledom. Socrates emphasizes that being numbed is a positive rather than a negative effect of his questioning. It is a positive effect because it thrusts the interlocutor into aporia, a state where the slave boy has realized not just that he holds contradictory beliefs, but also that he thought he knew the answer when in fact he did not. Socrates explains that this is the worst, most blameworthy ignorance—to walk about the world thinking that you know when you do not. Upon entering a state of aporia, the slave boy is likely to become more self-reflective and humble about the extent of his knowledge of important matters. Over time, this will lead him to become humanly wise, which is the only kind of wisdom accessible to human beings. Similarly, koan practice awakens Zen students by frustrating their discursive intellects. Another way of putting this is: it *deliberately* numbs them into puzzledom! It is thought that being in the state of puzzledom, is actually necessary in order to achieve awakening because it forces the Zen

student to abandon his or her assumptions about reality (one such assumption being that everything abides by logic and rational thought) and to become mindful about ultimate truths. The process of abandoning assumptions about reality and cultivating mindfulness leads to an awakening about one's place in the world and knowledge of it.

This leads me to the second point of overlap: *cultivating a thoughtful disposition leads to wisdom* of some kind. Socrates reproaches others for their lack of care and thoughtfulness about the important matters, not their knowledge of them. Since false belief about one's knowledge is an obstacle to being thoughtful, he urges others to develop thoughtful dispositions in order to become humanly wise. Similarly, Zen master Shunryu Suzuki tells us that wisdom is a product of mindfulness, which is a close synonym of thoughtfulness as far as I can see. Mindfulness is the state of mind acquired by intense and chronic concentration on the present moment and by the kind of awakening achieved in koan practice. Studying koans and practicing concentration on the present moment encourages mindfulness, which in turn leads to wisdom.

Third, *there is something bad about regarding oneself as an "expert"*. Before distinguishing between human and divine wisdom, Socrates reveals that those reputed "wise" with technical expertise (e.g., politicians, poets, craftsmen, teachers of virtue, etc.) were the most deficient in thoughtfulness about the best way to live one's life, while those with lower reputations for being "wise" (e.g., ordinary people) were more thoughtful about it. For this and the other reasons above, Socrates considered the label "wise" a great slander (I take "wise" to be a synonym to "expert" here). Similarly, Zen master Shunryu Suzuki elucidated the problem with regarding oneself as an expert: we end up limiting ourselves. This does us a cognitive disservice because human beings are originally limit-*less*. The only way to retain our original, boundless nature is to cultivate and practice beginner's mind.

The kind of wisdom that Socrates seems to promote (not thinking that you know something when you don't know it) seems similar to the concept of beginner's mind. Those familiar with Socrates know that he often expresses that he should hope to become another's "student". For example, when Socrates learns that Euthyphro is prosecuting his own father for murdering a murderer, he says, "It is indeed most important, my admirable Euthyphro, that I should become your pupil", because "If you [Euthyphro] had no clear knowledge of piety and impiety you would never have ventured to prosecute your old father for murder on behalf of a servant" (*Euthyphro* 5a; 15d). Of course, at the end of the dialogue Euthyphro has been shown to lack knowledge of piety and impiety and is in aporia about the matter. Although it's not obvious how Socrates is motivated by the desire to retain his original, boundless nature, as Suzuki would say, Socrates' inclination to adopt an

humbled, charitable disposition toward interlocutors like Euthypho suggests that he values emptiness and readiness of mind.

Finally, *the practices allow the person in the position of teacher to "test" and/or measure a student's progress towards aporia*. Recall that one aim of koan practice is for the Zen teacher to measure a student's progress towards awakening: if a student can comment freely and incisively on a koan, then he or she can be seen as breaking through aporia to achieve an awakening of her own. I have not explicitly addressed the topic of Socrates as a teacher (mainly because it makes up its own body of literature), but it is worth mentioning after all.

Socrates explicitly, passionately denies being a teacher of any subject to any person ever: "I have never been anyone's teacher. […] If anyone says that he has learned anything from me, or that he heard anything privately that the others did not hear, be assured that he is not telling the truth" (*Apology* 33a-b). Despite this, what Socrates does with Meno's slave boy in *Meno*, for example, looks a lot like teaching! Furthermore, Socrates describes himself as being in the "service of" the god on a religious mission to target the reputed wise for examination (*Apology* 23b). How are we to reconcile Socrates' seemingly conflicting self-reports with his perceived behavior? One way to reconcile them is to point out that Socrates' approach to teaching is negative rather than positive. When Socrates converses with Meno's slave boy, the "lesson" so to speak is that the youth is ignorant of the fact that the did not know the correct answer even though he thought he did. This is a negative lesson; "Socrates never denies doing *this* kind of teaching; indeed, in so far as *this* is teaching, Socrates plainly says he has made it his 'mission' to teach such things" (Brickhouse and Smith 70). Contrast this with the costly lessons of the sophists in ancient Greece, where students learn skills and doctrines for fees. Socrates does not teach skills or doctrines in the positive sense of the sophists. But just because he does not teach skills or doctrines, does not mean that he is a kind of teacher in one sense of the title. Therefore, its conceptually plausible to regard Socrates as a teacher who awakens his interlocutors, or students, to the negative lesson of their own conceit of knowledge and ignorance (I assume that sometimes we learn things from others without being conscious that we are "students". If this assumption is not too far fetched, then we can regard his interlocutors as being students.). If it is safe to regard Socrates as a teacher of ignorance, then it seems plausible that he at least sometimes uses his questioning to monitor his students' progress and lead them toward aporia.

Concluding Remarks

I began this exploratory essay with the hope that an analogy between Socrates' practice of question and answer and Zen Buddhist koan practice would be useful for determining how we ought to think about Socrates' method and aims, i.e., that drawing this analogy would *cause* us to react to Socrates' questioning in a way that perhaps we have not before. While the points of overlap I explicated in the previous section have not led to original claims about Socrates, I take them to support the orientation in the scholarly literature that Socrates does not aim to "refute" a thesis (in the early dialogues), but rather aims to awaken his interlocutor, or student, to his own ignorance.

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