

# SOCRATES' CHILDREN

*Thinking and Knowing in  
the Western Tradition*



Trudy Govier

# SOCRATES' CHILDREN

*Thinking and Knowing in  
the Western Tradition*

Trudy Govier



broadview press

## Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Govier, Trudy  
Socrates' Children

Includes bibliographical references and index

ISBN 1-55111-093-8

1. Philosophy – History. I. Title.

B72.G684 1997      190      C97-930774-0

Broadview Press  
Post Office Box 1243  
Peterborough, Ontario, Canada, K9J 7H5

in the United States of America  
3576 California Road, Orchard Park, N.Y. 14127

in the United Kingdom  
B.R.A.D. Book Representation & Distribution Ltd.  
244A, London Road, Hadleigh, Essex SS7 2DE

Broadview Press gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council, the Ontario Publishing Centre, and the Ministry of National Heritage.

Copyright © 1997 Trudy Govier

All rights reserved. The use of any part of this publication reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, or stored in a retrieval system, without prior written consent of the publisher – or, in case of photocopying or other reprographic copying, a license from CANCOPY (Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency), 6 Adelaide Street East, Suite 900, Toronto, Ontario M5C 1H6 – is an infringement of the copyright law.

Cover design and book layout: Alvin Choong Design Studio

PRINTED IN CANADA  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 97 98 99

# SOCRATES' CHILDREN

# Preface

Philosophers are supposed to be “great thinkers,” but they are often accused of restricting themselves only to critical thinking. Given a theory or argument, they can pose objections and take it apart. Is this the best we can get from philosophy – illustrations of how to destroy an idea? How did the great philosophers in the Western tradition think? Can we find in the history of Western philosophy any useful suggestions about how to think constructively or creatively?

It was an inter-disciplinary conference on Thinking in Boston in 1994 that led me to ask myself these questions. I was familiar with the criticism that Western philosophy has nothing to offer in the way of positive guidance about thinking, and I thought it would interesting to work through some philosophers central to the Western tradition to find out whether this was true. Men and women like Plato, Aristotle, Kant, de Beauvoir, and Wittgenstein, were nothing if not energetic and creative thinkers. What did they have to say about thinking? How did they think? Could we tell how they thought from what they wrote? When I described my ideas to Don LePan of Broadview Press, he was keenly interested in them and ultimately it was his encouragement which led me to write this book.

Soon after I began working on the book in the winter of 1995, I discovered the obvious: the theme of thinking cannot be treated by itself. It is not possible to understand or explain what a given philosopher had said about thinking without working through his or her ideas on a host of other subjects. Thus, more than I originally intended, this book turned into a selective general history – a presentation of some of the theories of knowledge, deliberation, meaning, and thinking central in the history of Western philosophy. To make sense of what various philosophers said or implied about thinking, I have had to describe what they thought about the sources of ideas, cer-

tainty, moral deliberation, doubt, belief, the moral life, religion, and many other topics. This book shows, I think, that the great philosophers did have some interesting things to say about thinking. And they thought in quite different ways. Socrates' style of thinking is different from Aristotle's; Hegel's differs from Hume's, which in turn is quite distinct from that of Descartes.

There are many histories of Western philosophy intended for students and general readers. What makes this one different from others? In addition to its development of themes pertaining especially to thinking, this book has several further differentiating features. I use quotations generously to provide a 'feel' for the philosophers described. I include two major women philosophers, Mary Wollstonecraft and Simone de Beauvoir. I often apply themes to contemporary examples. In the notes, I have included references to contemporary scholarship. The concluding chapter offers an overview of four current philosophical movements especially pertinent to thinking and knowledge: artificial intelligence research, the critical thinking-informal logic movement, deconstruction, and feminist epistemology. All the philosophers and trends discussed and described in an accessible and lively way.

This book is intended for every thoughtful reader who has wanted a better understanding of the history of Western philosophy but may be unable to start from a study of classic texts. In addition to those who are simply interested in philosophy and would like to know more about it, this group includes professionals in such fields as law, education, political science, psychology, and the sciences. Many people know that themes from philosophy past and present underlie their own work; they frequently encounter philosophical references which they would like to understand better. But they find the prospect of delving into Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, or Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* to be entirely daunting. I hope this book will provide easy access and interesting reading for such people, combining a sound background on central historical themes with practical and challenging advice about thinking itself.

This book is intended for students as well as for the general reader. It may be used as a sole text, or in conjunction with classic texts in a university or college introduction to the history of philosophy. The book is also suitable as a supplementary text in such courses as philosophy of education, philosophy of science, philosophy of law, women's studies, or anywhere else where it would be helpful to have available an accessible version of central philosophical views which are frequently alluded to, but not directly taught.

In the interest of readability, no formal footnotes were used. Notes following each chapter explain my sources, develop a few themes further, and offer suggestions for further reading.

In writing this book, I had to face many hard questions about whom to include and whom to exclude. To readers whose personal favorites were omitted, I can only say that including every worthwhile thinker was just not possible. The philosophical ideas are worth understanding in their own right, and all the philosophers discussed have made contributions to my ongoing theme of thinking. I regret not having space to include any medieval thinkers, and having to omit such important moderns as Locke, Leibniz, Rousseau, Berkeley, Spinoza, Mill, Russell, Moore, James, Peirce, Arendt, Husserl, Heidegger, Quine, Ayer, and Murdoch. Such thinkers could not be treated here, because the book had to be kept to a reasonable size.

I wish especially to thank David Gallop and Janet Sisson who both read virtually all chapters, offered many helpful criticisms, and have been extremely generous with their time. Thanks are also due to the anonymous reviewers for Broadview Press, to John Burbidge for reviewing the Hegel chapter, to Petra von Morstein for allowing me to audit her class on Hegel at the University of Calgary in the fall of 1995, and to my students in Philosophy 1000N at the University of Lethbridge in the summer of 1996 for their energy and interest. Nancy Heatherington Peirce offered useful comments on a late draft, and I am also indebted to Janet Keeping and Anton Colijn for ongoing moral support.

# Contents

<b>Preface</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>1 Socrates, the Sting Ray of Athens</b>	<b>1</b>
Thinking, Questioning, and Arguing	2
Discovering That We Do Not Know	5
The Quest for Definition	12
Observations: The Legacy of Socrates	16
<b>2 Plato: The Shadows, the Cave, and the Dazzling Sun</b>	<b>21</b>
Paradox and Recollection	23
The Divided Line	30
Dialectic	33
Dialectic and Thinking	34
The Sun and the Cave	36
Observations	38
Myth, Imagination, and Play	41
<b>3 Aristotle: Finding the Golden Mean</b>	<b>47</b>
Forms in the World	48
Aristotle and Plato	52
Practical Knowledge and Deliberation	55
Strategies for Thinking	60
Logic, Argument, and Dialectic	64
The Syllogism	64
The Principles of Non-Contradiction and the Excluded Middle	66
Demonstration and the Complete Science	70
Dialectic	72
Observations	73
<b>4 Descartes: Are There Rotten Apples in that Basket?</b>	<b>77</b>
The Method of Doubt	79
Cogito Ergo Sum: I think, therefore I am.	84
Proofs of God's Existence	88
The Problem of the Cartesian Circle	91
Thinking, Error, and Free Will	93
Mind and Matter	96
Observations: Cartesian Thought, Cartesian Problems	101



<b>5</b>	<b>Hume: Custom, the Cement of the Universe</b>	<b>107</b>
	Hume the Empiricist	109
	Hume's Perplexing Arguments	114
	Induction	114
	Causation	116
	The External World	117
	The Self	119
	Hume on Scepticism, Belief, and the Will	122
	Practical Implications	127
	Observations: Hume's Problems	132
<b>6</b>	<b>Wollstonecraft: The Oak that Braved the Storm</b>	<b>135</b>
	A Vindication of the Rights of Woman	141
	Thought and Reason	148
	Enlightenment and Romanticism; Reason and Emotion	152
	Observations	154
<b>7</b>	<b>Kant: The Starry Skies and the Moral Law</b>	<b>159</b>
	Rationalism, Empiricism, and Kant's Theory of Knowledge	161
	Kant's Arguments	166
	Two Distinctions	166
	Are Synthetic A Priori Judgements Possible?	168
	Space and Time	170
	The Categories	172
	Metaphysics	175
	Kant on Thinking	182
	Observations and Criticisms	187
<b>8</b>	<b>Hegel: Negation and Progress</b>	<b>189</b>
	Absolute Idealism	190
	Hegel on the History of Philosophy	194
	The Hegelian Dialectic	198
	What is Hegel's Dialectic	198
	Dialectic in the History of Philosophy and Elsewhere	201
	Some Qualifications	202
	Examples of Dialectical Development in <i>The Phenomenology of Spirit</i>	203
	Observations: Reflections on the Hegelian Dialectic	208
	After Hegel	212

<b>9</b>	<b>Beauvoir: More than Kings and Conquerors</b>	<b>215</b>
	Existentialism	217
	Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir	224
	Beauvoir's Existentialist Essays	226
	The Second Sex	229
	Thinking	239
	Fiction and Philosophy	239
	Observations: Applying Philosophy	240
<b>10</b>	<b>Wittgenstein: Duck-rabbits and Talking Lions</b>	<b>245</b>
	The Early Philosophy of the <i>Tractatus</i> :	
	Propositions and Pictures	247
	Saying and Showing	251
	The Mystical	253
	Thinking, According to the <i>Tractatus</i>	255
	The Vienna Circle and Logical Positivism	256
	Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy	258
	A Sceptical Problem and its Resolution	261
	Private Language and the Egocentric Predicament	264
	What is Thinking?	267
	How Wittgenstein Makes Us Think	272
	Wittgenstein on the Nature of Philosophy	278
	Observations	282
<b>11</b>	<b>Contemporary Voices</b>	<b>287</b>
	Artificial Intelligence	287
	The Informal Logic - Critical Thinking Movement	292
	Deconstruction	298
	Feminist Epistemology	303
	Concluding Comments	311
	<b>Notes</b>	<b>313</b>
	<b>Index</b>	<b>339</b>

# 1

## Socrates, the Sting Ray of Athens

Socrates (469 - 399 B.C.) is one of the most treasured personalities in the history of Western thought. He lived and worked in Athens, where he posed questions about virtue, knowledge, and understanding. Socrates was a well-known character in Athenian public life, noted for his capacity to ask probing questions and prove that people were not as wise as they thought themselves to be. In his day Athens was a major center of culture, allowing for democratic participation in government for male citizens, and considerable freedom of thought and expression.

Socrates left no written works; he philosophized through talking and arguing. What we know of Socrates comes from others who wrote about him. Plato, who was a student of Socrates in his later years, used Socrates as a main character in his philosophical dialogues. Plato's early dialogues are thought to portray Socrates' personality and style of thinking quite accurately. Other sources of information are the philosopher Aristotle, the chronicler Xenophon, and the comic playwright Aristophanes, who made fun of Socrates in his play *The Clouds*. The portrayal of Socrates here is based on Plato's early dialogues. For our purposes, Socrates is the character Plato described.

Short and stocky, with a snub nose, Socrates dressed shabbily and often went barefoot. Socrates was married and had three sons. Though of middle-class origins, he lived much of his life in poverty. Many people thought they had learned from Socrates, but he refused payment for his philosophical services, and insisted that he was not a teacher. Socrates was loved for his sense of humor, skill and persistence in argument,

and willingness to engage in philosophical conversation and debate.

Because of his tenacious questioning of prominent citizens and his dismissal of common opinion as a reliable source of knowledge, Socrates eventually alienated influential Athenians. He was tried and convicted on charges of corrupting the youth and not respecting the gods of the city. Socrates was sentenced to death, and died drinking a poison, hemlock, in 399 B.C.

Socrates was no solitary thinker. His method of thinking involved talking, questioning, and arguing, typically in a small group. An issue would arise – usually some practical matter, such as educating the youth, running the government, understanding poetry, or conducting a legal case – and then, from questions and answers, the group would proceed in its discussion, either acknowledging errors and contradictions or moving on to fresh ideas. As a result of Socrates' persistent questioning, these new ideas were often contrary to the original ones.

### Thinking, Questioning, and Arguing

People still use the phrase “Socratic method” in a way which preserves a connection with the historical Socrates. Today, the Socratic method is commonly understood as a means of teaching in which students are led forward by questions from the teacher. The approach is to work from the student's ideas; learning begins from what the student believes at the outset. In this sense, Socratic learning and teaching are based on an intense personal commitment. Despite his sense of humor and use of irony and sarcasm, Socrates was deeply serious about using philosophy to reflect on real problems of life and develop one's character. His mother Phaenarete was a midwife, and Plato said Socrates was a midwife too, in the sense that he was a person who helped ideas to be born. For Socrates, the goal of philosophical thought was knowledge: an enduring recognition and understanding of lasting truths. This understanding was to be sought in serious conversation and argument.

Socrates' seriousness and his concern to make sure that his fellow conversants agree with his starting points are illustrated in Plato's dialogue *Crito*. In this dialogue, Socrates is in prison under sentence of death and Crito is trying to persuade him that he should escape

from jail, with the assistance of his friends. Against his friend Crito, Socrates argues that escaping his death sentence would be wrong, because it would be disloyal to the Laws of Athens. It is to those Laws that he owes his birth, upbringing, and life, and he has previously indicated commitment to them by his willingness to live out his life in Athens.

Before making this case to Crito, Socrates questions him to make sure they are starting the argument from the same point. Crito alluded more than once to what most people would think about Socrates if he were to escape and save himself. Socrates reminds Crito that they had not previously resolved questions by appealing to common opinion.

Socrates: Was it always right to argue that some opinions should be taken seriously but not others? Or was it always wrong? Perhaps it was right before the question of my death arose, but now we can see clearly that it was a mistaken persistence in a point of view which was really irresponsible nonsense. I should like very much to inquire into this problem, Crito, with your help and to see whether the argument will appear in any different light to me now that I am in this position, or whether it will remain the same, and whether we shall dismiss it or accept it.

Serious thinkers, I believe, have always held . . . that some of the opinions which people entertain should be respected, and others should not. . . . You are safe from the prospect of dying tomorrow, in all human probability, and you are not likely to have your judgment upset by this impending calamity. Consider, then, don't you think that this is a sound enough principle, that one should not regard all the opinions that people hold, but only some and not others? What do you say? Isn't that a fair statement?

Crito: Yes, it is.

Socrates: In other words, one should regard the good ones and not the bad?

Crito: Yes.

Socrates: The opinions of the wise being good, and the opinions of the foolish bad?

Crito: Naturally.

Socrates: To pass on then, what do you think of the sort of illustration that I used to employ? When a man is in training and taking it seriously, does he pay attention to all praise and criticism and opinion indiscriminately, or only when it comes from the one qualified person, the actual doctor or trainer?

Crito: Only when it comes from the one qualified person.

Socrates: Then he should be afraid of the criticism and welcome the praise of the one qualified person, but not those of the general public.

Crito: Obviously.

(*Crito*, 46d - 47b)

Crito agrees with Socrates: one should heed only the advice of a qualified person; for example, this is what people should do if they seek advice on physical training or physical health. The same policy should hold when moral questions are at stake.

Socrates: Well, is life worth living with a body which is worn out and ruined in health?

Crito: Certainly not.

Socrates: What about the part of us which is mutilated by wrong actions and benefited by right ones? [Socrates is referring to the soul; he assumed that a person's soul is harmed if he acts wrongly.] Is life worth living with this part ruined? Or do we believe that this part of us, whatever it may be, in which right and wrong operate, is of less importance than the body?

Crito: Certainly not.

Socrates: It is really more precious?

Crito: Much more.

(*Crito*, 47e - 48a)

Crito had initially suggested that public opinion was a relevant and important factor to consider in making a choice. But Socrates has led him away from this belief; he changed Crito's mind by appealing to simple beliefs which they share. To move his argument forward, Socrates uses only statements that Crito is willing to accept. These include:

- Some opinions are better than others.
- The wise have better opinions than the foolish.
- A person training his body would pay attention only to the advice of a qualified advisor.
- Life with a ruined body would not be worth living.
- The soul is more precious than the body.

By implication, life with a ruined soul would not be worth living either. From these basic beliefs, Socrates leads Crito to the conclusions that a person should not ruin his or her soul, and should take advice only from a qualified person when deciding what to do. Common opinion about right and wrong is not an acceptable basis for making decisions about what to do.

Socrates was utterly committed to thinking by argument. In the *Crito* he acknowledges that the public, whose opinion he has dismissed on the basis of the above argument, has the power to put him to death. But Socrates feels sure that impending death – which most

people would feel as an acute crisis – does not affect the merit of the rational argumentation. The most important thing is to live one's life rightly. Would it be right or wrong for Socrates to escape? The answer will depend on what he and Crito can best work out in conversation; it does not depend on the circumstance of whether there is a risk of death. What matters is what is right or wrong, and in no circumstance should one do something which is wrong. Socrates assumes that human beings have a soul which is distinct from the body and more important than the body, and that this soul will be harmed if we do wrong.

In this dialogue, the thinking and arguing are done mostly by Socrates. Crito's role is rather limited. He is apparently there to agree with the statements that Socrates uses as a basis for his argument and to grant that Socrates' conclusion is true. Thoughtful readers may feel that Crito should have been more active: Socrates moves, without justification, from the idea that the opinions of the wise are better than those of the foolish (which is true because of the way the words "wise" and "foolish" are defined) to the idea that there is some *one* qualified person whose advice is the best (a highly controversial view).

## Discovering That We Do Not Know

In Plato's early dialogues, it is usually Socrates who raises provocative questions and pushes thought forward. Socrates often said that he was ignorant and did not know the answers to fundamental questions about justice, virtue, education, and knowledge. If his skill in argument made him sometimes seem superior to others, he insisted that it was an illusion. Any superiority Socrates might have lay in the fact that he *knew* he was ignorant, whereas other people tended to incorrectly believe that they were wise. According to Plato, Socrates argued quite seriously that he was the wisest person in the world, because he knew that he knew nothing. In contrast, other people thought they were wise, but lacked knowledge.

You know Chaerephon, of course. . . . Well, one day he actually went to Delphi and asked this question of the god . . . He asked whether there was anyone wiser than myself. The priestess replied that there was no one. . . . I am only too conscious that I have no claim to wisdom, great or small. So what can he mean by asserting that I am the wisest man in the world?  
(*Apology*, 21a-b)

Socrates began to interview people renowned for their wisdom and found that few really knew the things they thought they knew. In the process he made himself rather unpopular. Finally, after talking with politicians, poets, craftsmen, and others, Socrates reached an interpretation of what the oracle had said.

. . . real wisdom is the property of God, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value. It seems to me that he is not literally referring to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us, The wisest of you men is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless.  
(*Apology*, 23a-b)

There are several dialogues in which Socrates demonstrates that other people do not know what they think they know. In these dialogues, Socrates uses the tools of argument differently than in the *Crito*. In the *Crito*, we saw Socrates, with a small amount of participation from Crito, using argument to work out his own position. His argument proceeds from simple premises which strike Socrates as acceptable and are granted by Crito as a basis for carrying their thought forward. In other dialogues Socrates is shown using the tools of argument in a more negative way, to demonstrate that other people do not know what they think they know.

One prime example is the *Euthyphro*, still widely cited by philosophers interested in the relationship between religious belief and moral judgment. The *Euthyphro* discusses the relationship between piety (beliefs and attitudes toward the gods) and moral behavior. In this dialogue, Socrates, who has just been charged with impiety and corrupting the youth, meets Euthyphro at the entrance to the law courts and asks him what he is doing there. It turns out that Euthyphro is about to launch a prosecution against his own father on a charge of murder. Euthyphro's father had a domestic servant who had cut someone's throat; his father had bound the man, hand and foot, and left him in a ditch while waiting to find out what should be done about the case. The servant died lying in the ditch. Euthyphro believes that his father, being responsible for the death, should be charged with murder. Expressing amazement that anyone would prosecute his own father in a court of law, Socrates begins to question Euthyphro. Euthyphro is sure that he is acting rightly in bringing the prosecution, because he thinks he is doing what the gods would want him to do. He feels quite confident that he has an accurate knowledge of what the gods approve of – what is pious and impious, holy and unholy.



The question of piety and impiety is close to Socrates' heart: after all, he has himself been charged with impiety. He asks Euthyphro what piety is and how he knows about it.

Socrates: State what you take piety and impiety to be with reference to murder and all the other cases. Is not the holy always one and the same thing in every action, and, again, is not the unholy always opposite to the holy, and like itself? And as unholiness does it not always have its one essential form, which may be found in everything that is unholy?

Euthyphro: Yes, surely, Socrates.

Socrates: Then tell me. How do you define the holy and the unholy?

Euthyphro: Well then, I say that the holy is what I am now doing, prosecuting the wrongdoer who commits a murder or a sacrilegious robbery, or sins in any point like that, whether it be your father, or your mother, or whoever it may be. And not to prosecute would be unholy. And, Socrates, observe what a decisive proof I will give you that such is the law. . . . I tell them that the right procedure must be not to tolerate the impious man, no matter who.  
(*Euthyphro*, 5e)

Euthyphro goes on to mention tales of the gods and their quarrels. Socrates wonders aloud how people know what the gods are up to and what they think. But Euthyphro sees no need for scepticism about the gods.

Euthyphro: . . . I will, if you wish, relate to you many other stories about the gods, which, I am certain will astonish you when you hear them.

Socrates: I shouldn't wonder. . . . [but] you were not explicit enough before when I put the question. What is holiness? You merely said that what you are now doing is a holy deed – namely, prosecuting your father on a charge of murder.

Euthyphro: And Socrates, I told the truth.

Socrates: Possibly. But Euthyphro, there are many other things that you will say are holy.

Euthyphro: Because they are.

Socrates: Well, bear in mind that what I asked of you was not to tell me one or two out of all the numerous actions that are holy; I wanted you to tell me what is the essential form of holiness which makes all holy actions holy. I believe you held that there is one ideal form by which unholy things are all unholy, and by which all holy things are holy. Do you remember that?

Euthyphro: I do.

Socrates: Well then, show me what, precisely, this ideal is, so that