

common enterprise of inquiry to which all our arts and sciences and humanities contribute? Have we found it?" His own answer is: "In asking our question, for a coherent and adequate view of the world, whatever our special knowledges, we are all in the end humanists and philosophers."

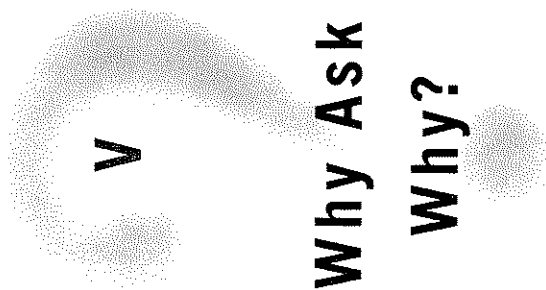
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I'm not at all sure that "we are all humanists and philosophers" merely because each of us may attempt to seek a "coherent and adequate" view of the world. A madman seeking power might manipulate questions in order to promote a "coherent and adequate" view of the world that demands the annihilation of people of certain races or ethnicities. A doomsday guru might ask only questions leading to answers that gibe with his "adequate and coherent" eschatological philosophy, so he can persuade his followers to commit mass suicide. Such people are not philosophers and humanists.

Clearly, many types of worldviews might seem to their proponents "adequate and coherent"—but such views might also be nonredemptive at best, inhumane at worst.

What type of worldview should we strive for?

The French novelist, critic, and essayist André Gide noted that the worth of any type of worldview is not only its adequacy and coherency "but also, and above all . . . the impetus it gives to the mind to make fresh discoveries and new proofs . . . the new vistas it opens, and the barriers it breaks down . . . the weapons it forges." Inhumane and intolerant worldviews do not allow for such ends.



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—ANONYMOUS

For a long time, the question has suffered at our hands. It isn't just that many of us fear questions. Rather, many of us seem to have only the flimsiest idea of the question's power and potential. And many of us no longer seem to have the faintest idea how to use it.

Consider: Is the glass half empty or half full?

There's something wrong with this question. It seems to allow only two possible answers. The problem with this question as set forth is a mirror of the problem with society at large. All too often we're indoctrinated to think in terms of "either-or." Is that man good or is he evil? Is that child gifted or isn't she? It never occurs to many of us that a child can be gifted in many ways, and not so in many others, that a man can be good in many ways, and yet evil in others.

We need to start asking: Is this really the best way to ask this question? Or are there other ways, ways that might lead to more fruitful answers?

We need a new generation of philosophers to transform all the old questions. By doing so, they will, as the English philosopher and classicist Gilbert Ryle put it, "give mankind a different air to breathe."

At one gathering of the Philosophers Club at Cesar Chavez Elementary School in San Francisco, I asked my fellow gang members for ideas for a question to discuss. They came up with a bunch of promising candidates: Can a lie ever be good? What is age? What is tolerance? These kids love to come up with questions.

Then Rafi said, "We could just keep going around in circles and asking question after question. We'd learn a lot just by doing that." He was right.

Then Jennifer asked, "What is a question?"

What a question! This was philosophical pay dirt.

"A question is something you try to answer," fellow club member Pilar replied.

"Why do we ask questions in the first place?" I asked.

"Because we wonder," Wilson said.

"Because we want to gain knowledge," said Arturo.

"Because we're curious," said Maria.

"Because we've observed something we don't understand," Eduardo said.

"What would life be without questions?" I asked.

"Boring," said Estefania.

"Nothing," said Jennifer.

"Impossible," said Rafi.

Rosa looked perplexed by these answers. "What do you think of what they said?" I asked her.

"Well, they may be right," she said, though her face indicated she felt otherwise. Then she said, "But what about that saying 'Curiosity killed the cat'?"

"Is it possible to be too curious?" I ask out loud.

TOO CURIOUS?

As I wait for responses, I wonder, to myself, whether under certain circumstances it just might be possible to be too curious, as much as I want to think otherwise. For ages thinkers have dealt with the question of whether we are too curious—whether it would be wise, or at least prudent, to put limits on how much we should aspire to know. Contemporary essayist and literary critic George Steiner, in *In Bluebeard's Castle*, says our civilization may

be "marked by a readiness not to endure rather than curtail the risks of thought." Although Steiner suspects that the boundlessly inquisitive nature some of us possess may prove to be our collective downfall, he is impressed that we continue to inquire anyway. "To be able to envisage possibilities of self-destruction, yet press home the debate with the unknown, is no mean thing."

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Steiner believes some forms of inquiry (though he doesn't say which) are in many respects a boon, because they enable us to "get certain perplexities into focus." And he says that "hope may lie in that small exercise." Though I agree it's necessary to get perplexities into focus, I don't think it's sufficient. Once they're in focus, the great exercise is to decide what course we should take next.

As in Athens during the days of Socrates, today we find ourselves in what the classical Greek scholar E. R. Dodds describes as a "great age of rationalism, marked by scientific advances beyond anything that earlier times had thought possible, and confronting mankind with the prospect of a society more open than any it has ever known." But, just as in ancient Greece, today we are experiencing "the unmistakable symptoms of a recoil from that prospect." Perhaps, as Dodds believes, the best an examiner of human nature can do is "remind his readers that once before a civilized people rode to this jump—rode to it and refused it." To Dodds, if we are going to stand a chance of making the jump this time around, we must first examine the demise of ancient Athens and discover an answer to this question: "Was it the horse that refused, or the rider?" His hunch is that "it was the horse—in other words, those irrational elements in human nature which govern without our knowledge so much of our behavior and so much of what we think is our thinking."

As society today makes its way along a path strikingly similar to that of ancient Athens, we seem to be approaching that same

precipice, where we must either jump or recoil. Like Steiner, Dodds seems to think there is reason to hope we'll fare better this time around. We seem, on the whole, to have more tools at our disposal that better enable us to fathom our nature and come to grips with, and overcome, its irrational side. Our heightened capacity in this regard, asserts Dodds, "seems to offer the hope that if we use it wisely we shall eventually understand our horse better; that, understanding him better, we shall be able by better training to overcome his fears; and that through the overcoming of fear horse and rider will one day take that decisive jump, and take it successfully."

It'll come as no surprise that I think one of the most fruitful ways for steeling us to take the jump is the Socratic method. It enables us to bring into better focus, and then to resolve, our perplexities. Not once and for all, to be sure, because new perplexities always present themselves. But in a way that can make us more knowledgeable and at the same time more empathetic and insightful—more virtuous, Socrates might say.

I have not come across any contemporary philosopher who has formulated our predicament, and our challenge in dealing with it, with more insight and eloquence than Suzanne Langer, a longtime professor of philosophy at Connecticut College who developed a fundamental theory of symbolism that attempted to explain the meaning and cognitive import of art. In *Philosophical Sketches*, she presents it this way:

The problem of restoring the mental balance which humanity has obviously lost in this age is not psychiatric, or religious, or pedagogical, but philosophical. . . . What we need today is . . . a generation of vigorous thinkers, fiercely devoted to philosophy . . . prepared to learn whatever special skill or knowledge they may find needful—trained as fully as any scientists, without

evasion of dry subjects or stepwise procedures—people who can tackle terrible questions and fight through all the misconceptions and confusing traditions that mix up our thoughts and our lives.

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In short, we need a new generation of philosophers steeped in the Socratic method and ethos. But I don't understand why Langer labels as "terrible" those questions these philosophers will be charged to address. I don't think any question *ipso facto* has to be terrible. I read once in a daily newspaper a story about a devoted husband and father of five children who was killed by an initiate in a gang while he was washing his car. The reporter wrote that his children now were "asking such terrible questions as, 'My daddy is a good person, so why did they kill him?' and 'Where is my daddy now?'"

The tragedy itself was terrible, but the questions were not. So what we need, I think, are philosophers who will also "fight through the misconceptions" that lead us to mistake as "terrible" those vital questions that cry out to be addressed in a meaningful way.

"Is it possible to be too curious?" I again ask the Philosophers Club members. As I look at their wise, inquisitive young faces, I think to myself that I am conversing with the new generation of philosophical inquirers of whom historians will one day write glorious things. The time is ripe for such a development. As Suzanne Langer notes, "great periods of philosophy" have always come on the heels of "periods of fast cultural growth or novel experience," and we are experiencing both in great measure. In spite of considerable evidence to the contrary, I believe with Langer that somehow good just might prevail, that a new generation of philosophers will "stretch" the human mind and provide us with

a "more or less general reorientation in the world," a "new development" in our "feeling for nature and each other."

Is it possible to be too curious?

"Maybe it's a question we shouldn't try to answer," Carmen of the Philosophers Club said finally in response to my query after giving the matter a great deal of thought. But then she quickly added, "But I can't *help* it. If someone asks me a question, or if I think up a question, I feel like I *have* to try to answer it. I'm *too* curious!"

Too curious.

I think of Socrates. In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates had this to say to his persecutors: "All I do as I go about is try to persuade you, both young and old, to make your first and chief concern the improvement of your soul. . . ."

Socrates so loved the question that he preferred to die than live without it. He knew the question's potential. And he knew it possessed just as much danger as it did promise. In the wrong hands, he knew it could lead to doom, and in the right hands, to salvation of a sort. But he knew that there were no guarantees, and that even the most well-intentioned questioning can have unforeseen consequences—perhaps wonderful, perhaps tragic, possibly both.

Still, the greatest danger of all, Socrates knew, was to try to dispense with the question altogether. His persecutors felt his type of questioning was subversive. They were right. If they had allowed themselves to become smitten with it, their lives would have been thrown into glorious upheaval. Their civilization might have taken a much more redemptive and fruitful turn than the freefall it took.

His persecutors' preferred brand of questioning was one in which they already had the authoritative answers to the

questions posed. They duped themselves into thinking they knew the truth, and they weren't about to let anyone make them appear to be less than all-knowing sages. Socrates made it all too clear that their "Emperor's New Clothes" brand of wisdom was wearing thin. Unlike these false prophets, he could not cry "Peace! Peace!" when there was no peace.

Too curious?

Socrates didn't just question for the sake of questioning. He questioned out of conviction. He questioned in order to become the best human being possible. He was considered heretical, iconoclastic, subversive. And he was all of these things. Guilty as charged. If only all of us shared and shouldered his guilt.

Laszlo Versenyi says it is precisely because of Socrates' striving for excellence—his "superior character and insight"—that he was "powerless against the ignorance and wrongdoing of others and [had] to fall."

"If this is true," he writes, "wisdom and virtue acquire a tragic dimension, for Socrates' fate would indicate that our world is so constructed that a man of excellence is necessarily homeless in it and has to perish at the hands of those who, though inferior, dominate it to the detriment of us all."

SEEKING IGNORANCE

"Does anyone have the right to be ignorant?"

The query comes from a student sprawled on a sofa that has seen better days. The question wafts my way as I try to find my center of gravity on an off-balance chair. John, the inquisitor, has long curly red hair which seems to be off limits to a comb. His

pale oval face features a universe of freckles. His jet black eyes stand out in stark relief. He has a thick leather studded collar around his neck; the kind I've seen on many a bulldog over the years.

I am facilitating my first Socrates Café in a semi-enclosed room at the far end of a spacious café situated in a community college in Northern California. I have arrived early, as I typically do when I facilitate at a new venue; I'm always a bit worried that I'll get lost and will be late. When I arrive, I see that several others are already on hand. Instead of a stool, I have been provided with a slightly off-balance director's chair. I smile gamely at my fellow strangers as I try my best to perch myself comfortably on the chair, which tilts precariously to the right.

It's not time for the discussion to get under way, but for some reason I'd feel silly saying to him, "Let's wait to discuss your question when Socrates Café officially gets under way in ten minutes." Besides, by this time, twelve others have already shown up. They all seem intrigued by John's question.

In fact, before I even have a chance to respond, a woman whose booming voice belies her diminutive stature, says, "I don't think we have a right to be ignorant. I think we have a responsibility to constantly educate ourselves, to make ourselves less ignorant."

Then another woman, who is an elementary school student-teacher, says, "Well, as much as I might wish we don't have the right to be ignorant, I think we do. I don't see anything in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, or the Bill of Rights with the injunction 'Thou shall not be ignorant.' But having said that, I think in a democratic society like ours, in order to be fully involved in it, we should feel an *obligation* to become less and less ignorant. Which means, at least to me, like she said, that we must continually educate ourselves."

"I love the wide-eyed look of exuberance of children who discover the joys of learning, and as a consequence become less ignorant," says a woman who is a part-time student and works part-time at the college's day care center for employees and students. "And yet they retain such an innocence. Education is a process of making us less ignorant without necessarily making us jaded. In fact it can endow us with an even greater sense of wonder. And wonder, I think, is a form of innocence."

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"Is all education a process of making someone less ignorant?" I ask her. "It seems that you can be 'educated' to believe that white people are superior, for instance, or you can be 'educated' to think that only people who subscribe to certain beliefs are going to heaven—and such 'education' only feeds and foments ignorance."

The teacher mulls this over for a moment before replying, "That's true. So I think I need to amend what I said earlier and say that education at its best is a process of making us less ignorant. And at its worst, education is a mockery of what education is supposed to be all about, and can actually make you 'less educated,' which is the same thing as being 'more ignorant.' I think this latter type of education isn't really education at all, but is 'indoctrination' or 'brainwashing.'"

"So educating people to be more open-minded, to be lifelong critical thinkers, is not a form of indoctrination?" I ask.

"It is," says a middle-aged man. Before he explains himself further, he tells us that this is his first time on campus today, that he was looking into pursuing studies in sociology after taking a thirty-year hiatus from school, and that it was just by happenstance that he passed by the café, where our discussion was set to begin, as he was making his way back to his car in the parking lot. "It's a good type of indoctrination, because it leads you to realize that there's no such thing as the answer in any area of knowledge."

It leads you to realize that you'll always be ignorant of so much more than you'll know. And by robbing you of your innocence of this fact, it inspires you to keep learning all your life."

"What's the difference between ignorance and innocence?" I ask the group.

"You can be both ignorant and innocent. In fact, more often than not I think they go hand in glove—but they're not the same thing," says a frail man with tiny blue eyes and a bushy mustache that threatens to envelop the entire lower region of his face. He has just enrolled in college this semester after a lifetime of autodidactic learning. "I think it's good to be ignorant of some things," he says. "I've taken a lot of risks with my life. And when I look back on the decisions I've made, I realize that if I knew then what I know now, I'd probably never have had the courage to take these risks, though they enabled me to live a thrilling life in which I traveled all over the world. So it was good to be ignorant and innocent."

"I think you're confusing the concepts ignorance and innocence," another participant says to him. "You weren't ignorant when you took these risks, because you didn't intentionally put on blinders to prevent yourself from knowing certain things that might have made you think twice about doing the things you did. But you *were* innocent of the potential pitfalls. So, you can choose to be ignorant, but you're *naturally* innocent. There's no choice to innocence. For instance, until you experience the grief over the loss of a loved one, you're innocent about what such an experience would be like. But if someone ever tried to explain to you what such grief is like and you closed yourself off to this person, then you'd have purposely chosen to be ignorant."

"I think that no one would choose to be ignorant," says an elderly woman sitting next to the young schoolteacher. "I think that

it is our nature to desire to know everything we can, because knowledge is good."

"I disagree," says a man who identifies himself as a history professor. "I don't think we all have a desire to know. Some cultures seem to bask in their innocence. And many Western intellectuals think such innocence is a great thing. For instance, Rousseau glorified and romanticized the innocence of primitive cultures. But if these cultures had been less innocent of the ways of conquering nations, they probably wouldn't be living in the wretched conditions of exploitation so many of them live in today. Many of these cultures seemed to want to be 'kept in the dark' about such things."

"However, having said that," he goes on to say, "I do not think that all knowledge is good. Sometimes ignorance is a very good thing." He pauses, as if deciding whether he should explain himself. Then, his brow furrowing, he says, "I never told my mother that my dad, her husband, died. Because I felt it would be too devastating for her. Dad has been dead several months now, and Mom is on the edge of senility. She still doesn't know. I think it's best if she remains ignorant of this."

There is a long lull. No one seems quite to know what, if anything, to say next.

"I think it's even worse when people aren't ignorant of certain things and yet still act with ignorance," John finally offers. "For instance, when a racist continues to be a racist, yet is aware of the reasons why he's a racist—perhaps he's even aware that his racism is illogical because he knows damn well that all of us are 99.9 percent genetically identical—then that's even more scary than when people are racist out of sheer ignorance."

"It seems like we're distinguishing between willful and unwillful ignorance, what someone earlier referred to as 'intention-

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ality," says a student who is scrunched into a small space on the same sofa on which John is sprawled. "It seems that at any given point in our lives, we're ignorant of tons of things. In order to do A, we have to turn a blind eye to B, C, D..."

"You're so right," says a man who is leaning against a wall in a far-off corner and now approaches the group. He identifies himself as the dean of student affairs. "In fact," he then says, "if I tried to do everything I'd like to do, I'd probably never accomplish much of anything because I'd be stretching myself so thin. So maybe the best we can do is to be aware of our ignorance, but not to accept that we always have to be as ignorant as we are now."

"I think that was Socrates' philosophy," the history professor then says. "And the reason I think he was the wisest man who ever lived is because he recognized just how ignorant he was. Every time he interrogated a Sophist, even though he said he was seeking knowledge from them, he really was seeking out their ignorance—because in every instance, the Sophists clearly didn't know what they claimed to know. So Socrates concluded that there's hardly any knowledge at all, but a whole lot of ignorance."

Then he looks at me for an uncomfortably long time. Finally he says with a wry smile, "I think you're seeking ignorance, just like Socrates did."

THE SOCRATIC SENSIBILITY

It was time to wrap up our dialogue, so this last comment was left unchallenged. But it stayed with me long after the dialogue ended. Over the years I've heard many others say variations of the same thing as this history professor—namely, that Socrates was seeking ignorance because he claimed he didn't know anything

authoritatively. But I don't think this is so. There's a big difference between claiming to know something and claiming to know something authoritatively. Socrates falls in the first camp. He'd never make a claim like "I know because I don't know." I think he'd have considered such a statement disingenuous at best. Socrates was intensely committed to the task of discovering what it was to be an excellent human being, and he did teach people a specific way, or method, of becoming more and more enlightened about how to become more virtuous. Many philosophers ever since, from Hume to Descartes to Wittgenstein to Russell, have taken this "skeptical attitude"—what I call this Socratic sensibility—as their own launching pad for gaining insight into many of life's most vexing conundrums. And this sensibility has always been associated with the most searching and penetrating analyses of the great philosophers.

All who adopt this sensibility are unwilling to accept conclusions unless there are very convincing grounds for them. A Zen master might exhort you, "Don't think: Look!" because when you're thinking, you're trying to understand instead of bathing yourself in direct experience. But Socrates would exhort you: "Look. And think. Then look some more. And think some more. Don't ever stop looking, or thinking." He would maintain that thinking is a form of looking, a form of direct experience. If you look without thinking, then that would be intentional ignorance, a kind of blindness. But if you look and think, if you observe and think, and also listen to others' perspectives on what they observe and think, then you'll still be ignorant, but not quite as ignorant. You'll have inched a little further along the Socratic version of the path of enlightenment.

And by inching along in this fashion, by seeking the truth gropingly, you become less and less ignorant. You gain what might be called wisdom of a certain sort, "Socratic wisdom,"

which amounts to this: You are better able to determine what you do know—what stands up to rigorous scrutiny—and what you do not know. You become aware of the existing limits of your knowledge, but in a way that inspires you to push those limits further and further outward. As Richard Tarnas puts it, for Socrates "the discovery of ignorance was just the beginning of the philosophical task," not the end. After discovering one's ignorance, one can then "begin to overcome one's received assumptions that obscured the true nature of what it was to be a human being." Socrates was reviled by many Athenians for showing them how murky and confused was their use of such concepts as courage, justice, the good, and virtue. They resented his insistence on critically analyzing the exact meaning of propositions and determining the precise extent to which they were true. Yet reflective examination, among other things, can show us that some errors stem from inaccurate knowledge, others from faulty reasoning, and still others from careless use of language.

To this day, Socrates' example continues to teach us how to expand our own intellectual and imaginative horizons. He was extremely critical of those who let other people do their thinking for them. He saw his role as akin to that of a midwife; he helped people give birth to their own ideas, and to work through the particular beliefs by which they could choose to live.

TRUE TEACHING

Above all, Socrates has passed on to us the conviction that we must be willing to subject our beliefs radically and continually to encounter upon encounter, from without and from within. Socrates engaged in what Laszlo Versenyi describes as "true teach-

ing," the centerpiece of which is "a questioning of accepted opinions, an examination of beliefs, a refutation of dogmas, a testing of knowledge and an indictment of ignorance."

It is humbling, to be sure, for a person to discover that much of what he thought he knew was based on a foundation of quicksand. But as Socrates says in Plato's *Theaetetus*, "If you should ever conceive again . . . your budding thoughts should be better as a result of this scrutiny. . . ." In Plato's *Meno*, Socrates first catechized the young slave in such a way that he came to realize he didn't know what he thought he knew. Socrates didn't do this to make the boy look silly, much less to discourage him from learning. To the contrary, as Socrates himself explains in *Meno*, "By making him perplexed and giving him a shock we haven't done him any harm . . . rather, we've helped him toward finding the truth, for now he'll search gladly, seeing. . . . But do you think he would have tried to search and to acquire knowledge while he thought he knew what he did not know, before he was reduced to the perplexity of being aware that he did not know and this yearning for knowledge? . . . Now, because of his loss, he will find out something, searching with me. . . ."

"*Sed omnia praeclara tam difficilia quam rara sunt*," Spinoza writes at the end of his *Ethics*: "Everything excellent is as difficult as it is rare." Yet our ideas of "excellence" today seem all too often tied to the acquisition of material wealth. But it is neither exceedingly difficult nor rare for shrewd investors with considerable money to begin with to rake in gobs more money in a bullish economy. Nor is it difficult, or rare, for today's philosopher-sophists, just as in the days of Socrates, to "counsel" the wealthy that virtually *any* goal they set for themselves and then go on to accomplish is "excellent." They steer clear at all costs from Socrates' view that "virtue does not come from wealth, but . . . wealth and every good thing that men have . . . comes from virtue."

In my travels, I've even encountered a few academic philosophers who philosophize with private "clients" at hefty hourly rates. Some seem threatened that I don't aim to profit from philosophizing with the public; and they resent that I show people, many of whom never have and never will take a university course in philosophy, how to facilitate discussions themselves using the Socratic method. They want all "public philosophers" to have graduate degrees in philosophy, and to be "certified"; and they want to charge tidy sums for such certification. To them, it's vital that the general public philosophize only with a specialist, and at a cost.

I've encountered some today who, like the fee-charging Sophists of old, take pains to disparage Socrates himself. They maintain that if Socrates earned no wages from his philosophizing, then he already had money or was propped up by wealthy friends, a classic sophism. It's easy to say that only the rich or their coterie can afford to give short shrift to purely money-making endeavors; but it is a great insult to the countless people who disavow material gain in order to devote their lives to higher causes. And Plato's *Apology* makes crystal clear that Socrates willingly lived in extreme poverty in order to stay true to his ideals.

Socrates engaged in a lifelong pursuit of a type of excellence that no amount of money could buy. Of the wealthy who might inspire to be his patrons today, I'd like to think he might ask: Is it possible to envision a society in which the gap between rich and poor is much less dramatic than it is now? Are you responsible for the well-being of your fellow humans? What is more important, the way you earn your money or the fact that you are successful at it? What is "success"? Is it still "excellent" if the corporations responsible for your windfall are responsible for environmental degradation and labor exploitation?

HUMAN EXCELLENCE

To Socrates, an excellent human being is one who strives to acquire certain virtues, such as temperance, courage, and wisdom. Why? Because the acquisition of such virtues creates a different kind of wealth—a wealth of empathy, of imaginative vision, of self-discovery.

Implicit within the “Socratic virtues” is this injunction: You can only attain human excellence if you also strive to make it possible for your fellow humans to do so too. To embrace this injunction requires both a social conscience and an imaginative vision that has always been difficult and rare.

In the *Apology*, his fate in the balance, Socrates has this to say to his fellow Athenians:

As long as I breathe and have the strength to go on, I won't quit philosophizing, I won't quit exhorting you and whomever I happen to meet, in my customary way: Esteemed friend, citizen of Athens, the greatest city in the world, so outstanding in both intelligence and power, aren't you ashamed to care so much to make all the money you can, and to advance your reputation and prestige—while for truth and wisdom and the improvement of your soul you have no care or worry?

To Socrates, a person “should only consider whether, in doing anything, he is doing right or wrong—acting the part of a good man or bad.”

At the end of Plato's *Phaedo*, the moving dialogue that describes the final moments of Socrates' life, his closest friends visit

him in his prison cell. Just before he drinks the hemlock, they ask him what they can do to “be of most service” to him. Socrates has just one request: he bids them to continue to “follow that path of life” which they have discovered, over the course of many rich dialogues together, makes life worth living.

SOCRATES
CAFÉ