Socrates, Spirituality and the 21st Century Knowledge-Building

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This duty of cross-examining other men has been... signified to me by oracles, visions, and in every way in which the will of divine power was ever intimated to anyone.

(Socrates in the Apology, p. 20).

Often regarded as the father of Western thinking and a key reference point for the emergence of modern society, Socrates is a pivotal figure in human history, especially in terms of the gap or transition between traditional and modern knowledge systems. This study proposes to explore the ongoing, future, and also ‘spiritual’ relevance of both the general example of Socrates the educator and the methods he developed which have been a key source of Western ethics, logic, and rhetoric. Indeed, in terms of its influence on his student Plato and his own student Aristotle, Socrates’ elenchus method has been regarded as the key prototype and seminal influence on the emergence of a general model of thinking and knowledge construction typically referred to as the ‘scientific method’ (Vlastos, 1992; Sott, 2002). Likewise, the sense of irony as well as other rhetorical techniques with which Socrates both verbally and strategically or philosophically applied his general method of inducing learning, thinking, and knowledge in others was a focus for the

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great 19th century philosopher, Kierkegaard to recognize him as the first modern thinker – both generally and also specifically in the context of his own influential efforts to redefine spirituality in the modern age. Heidegger’s reference in the early 20th century to Socrates’ as the purest thinker in the West was developed by Hannah Arendt (1989: 20) into an insight that Socrates’ was the great discoverer of a trulyuniversal perspective on the human condition – the ‘vita activa’ of human thought linked to action.

Yet, Socrates was prepared to effectively sacrifice his own life for a final and ultimate pedagogical act. The lesson of his death – or his actual response to being condemned to death – was perhaps the embodied principle that such notions as self-knowledge, wisdom, and ‘ethical virtue’ must remain a convergent and dialogical cornerstone of all truly rigorous, constructive, and non-distorted or contaminated human thinking, learning, and knowledge building of any kind. Socrates was also effectively condemned to a death he reportedly might have avoided for an avowed sense of spirituality which his critics at the time interpreted as ‘impiety’ but was defended as a religious duty to apply the idea of universal standards and qualities of human thought and action. These are standards and qualities which not only remain relevant today but perhaps ever increasingly so. Thus, this study proposes to explore the future and global relevance of Socrates’ example and methods for a 21st century paradigm of learning and knowledge convergence – an approach to ‘knowledge building’ which represents a still effective remedy for the great challenges facing mankind.

The study will, therefore, explore a series of related proposals. The first section will revisit how the standards and qualities which Socrates’ the thinker and educator was not prepared to compromise at any cost represent ethical, educational, and socially inclusive or intercultural principles of human universality - principles which might be equated with an inclusive sense and convergent concept of spirituality. In terms of such principles, section 2 will re-examine Socrates’ elenchus method as, above all else, an emergent model of knowledge-building by which all humans both individually and collectively ever navigate the gap between ‘what we know’ and
‘what we don’t know’. Socrates strategies and methods of inducing knowledge and even wisdom in others focused on his distinction between close-minded (arrogant) and open-minded (potentially wise) ‘ignorance’. There are many different types and perspectives on human knowledge construction. But, as epitomized by Socrates’ famous saying that ‘the unexamined life is not worth living’, none have ultimate sustainability without the capacity and motivation for individual and also collective self-knowledge. Thus, the third section will examine the question of whether the historical example and knowledge building methods of Socrates’ may even be more relevant for a 21st century context than they have been for a Western history of ideas and for such modern concepts as democracy and critical thinking – that is, the context of an age of increasing social and personal confusion and even panic corresponding to similarly growing senses of chaos and uncertainty about the connection between the human past and future. This will require a re-examination of whether Socrates ironical application of his method of knowledge-building can be adequately defended against not just his accusers at the time but also critics throughout history who have attempted to dismiss both Socrates legacy and his avowed spirituality as merely a ‘sophist’ pretention or even ‘modernist’ indulgence.

Socrates and the Distinction between Religious and Universal Spirituality

Religion is not identical with spirituality; rather religion is the form spirituality takes in civilization.

— Thompson (1981, 103)

It was well-known in the Athens of his day that Socrates’ uncompromising efforts to encourage others to think and build knowledge more honestly and effectively – that is, to appreciate the principle of truth and aspire to wisdom and ethical virtue - were not always appreciated by all. Although his efforts as a self-conceived ‘gadfly’ and social conscience of his community clearly annoyed some influential people, the main charge which resulted him in being condemned to death was one which questioned his
sense of spirituality. Although a great ‘ironist’ by any definition, reports of Socrates’ response to such a charge suggest that he had little choice but to underplay the series of great ironies associated with this event. Whilst his alleged crime was of ‘impiety’ against the gods, he was charged in terms of how this was perceived as really a transgression against the polis or his ‘society’. Likewise, the associated assumption that he, therefore, also aimed to ‘corrupt the young’ was not just reinforced by ill-informed critics but also by former students or respondents who betrayed his essential good faith. Above all, he would have reflected on the irony of the related implication that he was effectively being tried as a merely clever and calculating ‘sophist’ when he was so consistently on record as challenging the self-deceit of such people and their practices.

As also outlined in his version of Socrates’ ‘Apology’, Xenophon provides substantial support for the view that Socrates’ defense against and general response to the charges consistently exemplified the words and actions of: (a) a basically sincere and honorable man, and (b) someone who consistently refused to compromise either himself or his adherence to universal principles. Although Xenophon was away at the time of Socrates trial and death, there is no reason to doubt that he was a reliable witness to how reports of this link to the Socrates’ of ‘old’ that he knew well: “what a glorious chance he had to display the full strength of his soul… just as in the old days he had never harshly opposed himself to the good things of life morosely, so even in the face of death he showed no touch of weakness, but with gaiety welcomed death’s embrace, and discharged life’s debt’ (59-60). In this way, the equanimity and courage which Socrates displayed at his ‘fate’ also providing supporting evidence for the genuine ‘spirituality’ of his famous redemptive assertions that: (a) a virtuous person who attempts to do ‘the right thing’ in good faith cannot ultimately by ‘harmed’ by others, (b) that ‘no-one voluntarily does wrong’, and (c) that those who do wrong to others commit a greater misdeed or crime against themselves. In this context, we might re-examine not just the question of Socrates’ ‘piety’ but also the various aspects of his avowed spiritual and not just ethical motivation for often unpopular and
provisionally confusing methods of trying to induce more effective knowledge and greater wisdom in others. We might also consider his related reflections on the question of achieving or attaining ‘immortality’.

As exemplified and represented in the various relevant Dialogues of Plato, Socrates’ reflections on such related spiritual topics as questions of piety, immortality, conscience, and the meaning of life revolve around the notion that ‘the gods’ had provided him with the gift of a personal ‘daimon’ or ‘oracle’ who could guide him to ‘do the right thing’ - if he listened to it. Such a ‘divine faculty’ was also held by Socrates to provide the enduring reference point for a person’s sense of ethical virtue as this was sustained or not in the practical engagements of life. In The Apology, Socrates is reported to have spoken at his trial about how his daimon had provided guidance such that he did not view his impending death as an evil to be feared. Socrates’ daimon did not present itself or interfere if he was on the ‘right track’ (only if he was about to do or say something not appropriate) and, thus, did not appear on the day of the trial. Unlike the modern notion of a ‘demon’ the concept of ‘a daimon’ in pre-Socratic Greece was not generally evil. On the contrary, it was equated with minor deities who might act on behalf of the important gods within the Greek pantheon – more like an angel in one sense, but also as unreliable as the Greek gods could be at times. Others such as Heraclitus rather viewed ‘the daimon’ as a representation of a ‘man’s character’ or deeper self.

Anticipating Roman as well as later Western notions of either personal genius or a guiding sense of divine inspiration, Plato’s somewhat different interpretation to Socrates (e.g. in Cratylus) is that ‘the daimon’ (as distinct from ‘the daimones’) is each person’s ‘guiding genius’. In the Symposium Dimotima tells Socrates that everything ‘daimonic’ lies between the mortal realm of humans and the immortal realms of the gods (p.295). In contrast to the often unreliable personal daimons of other men, Socrates’ own particular daimon was conceived to be a rather faithful bridge between particular human affairs and a universal perspective.
Socrates’ concept of the daimon was, thus, clearly associated with notions of personal conscience on the one hand, and some kind of universal standard on the other. Indeed, in preparing to reply in court to his accuser Meletus about the charge of impiety, Socrates is represented in the Euthyphro as achieving a concession that the Gods are not always consistent in their behaviour. On this basis, he systematically demolished not just Euthyphro’s definitions of piety, but by implication that of Meletus and the other accusers, and also the anticipated judgment of the court itself. Socrates was able to get such a concession through his ironical tactic of initially proposing that since Euthyphro is such an expert on piety he should have no problems adequately defining this.

In this way, Socrates is not only projected as the victim of a contradictory definition but effectively of a dimension of divine spirituality which is supposed to be universal but which humans either arbitrarily separate from or rather confuse with the projected vagaries of a non-divine human dimension. Or, as Xenophon puts it in his Memorabilia, the problem is that “whereas most people seem to imagine that the gods know in part, and are ignorant in part, Socrates believed firmly that the gods know all things” (2008b, Book 1, 19). In other words, Socrates’ was really being charged with impiety on the basis that, in relation to his earlier refusal to countenance the death sentence of ‘the nine generals’, he had challenged the polis’ efforts to selectively apply its laws as if they were also the ‘will of the gods’. In response to the charge of impiety Socrates effectively argued that an ‘internal’ ethical imperative has greater and, thus, divine or universal constancy than the selective and often distorted vagaries of a constructed social morality.

In the Apology, there is a corresponding two-fold basis on which Socrates is held to not so much accept his fate and sentence but to refuse to either avoid this or be fearful of his impending death. On the one hand, Socrates points out that any attempt by himself to evade the judgment made against him on behalf of the polis would undermine his own consistently claimed right to refuse to agree to the corrupt application of human laws as if this was also the ‘will of the gods’. In short, he acknowledges that if he tried to
flout the court ruling he would be setting a bad example in many ways but especially so by effectively ‘teaching’ the judges ‘to believe that there are no gods’ (p.22) when this is their own unsubstantiated claim against him. In other words, he would be seen to justify the guilty verdict if he attempted to flee it. On the other hand, he refers to how other condemned men who act shamefully in the face of their impending death and who aspire to immortality ‘if you only allowed them to live’ (p.220). The end section of the Apology links with the Phaedo in terms of Socrates’ reported reflections about the meaning of a concept of immortality inherent in his notion that ‘no evil can happen to a good man, either in this life or next’ (p.28).

In the Phaedo and also in the Meno, Socrates is reported to have outlined a concept of the soul which is further linked with a theory of ‘recollection’. It has also been interpreted by some to mean the knowledge of past lives but, perhaps more to the point, generally refers to innate human capacities, knowledge, and wisdom held to be ‘forgotten’ as children grow into adults caught up in the mundane challenges of everyday life. In discussion with Simmias and Cebes in the Phaedo, Socrates’ does not so much challenge the Pythagorean concept of the underlying and innate harmony of the world and the soul. Rather, he points out how this is tied to the related dynamic processes of maintaining ethical equilibrium on one hand, and the building of meaningful knowledge on the other.

The problem of distinguishing between the ideas of Socrates and those of his main historical witness Plato is perhaps clarified to some extent by the other discussions of immortality in the Symposium. In the Phaedo Socrates arguably represents a quite Platonic view of the immortality of the human soul somewhat at odds with the perishable nature of the human body. Although similar sentiments are initially expressed in the Symposium, after a while concessions are made also by Socrates to the ‘wisdom of Eros’ as distinct from transitory and shameful ‘erotics’. Socrates’ more ‘down to earth’ and egalitarian practicality is often directly indicated in the accounts of Xenophon and Plato. This is in addition to being interpreted ‘between the lines’ as distinct from the transcendental or idealistic
tendencies of Plato. For instance, in this session Alcibiades complains that even if they try to get Socrates drunk he is able to continue to drink ‘without any risk of getting more drunk’ (p.308).

In this dialogue, Socrates’ discussion about his meeting with Diotima is recounted. In response to Diotima’s claim, that Eros is not a god but a ‘daimon’ who intersects between mortal and immortal realms of human existence, Socrates concedes that there is a positive aspect to the association of Eros with both the principles of beauty and human love or affection on the one hand, and with an ‘engendering’ mode of human immortality achieved through physical reproduction on the other (p.301). Although elsewhere, a Platonic Socrates tends to equate the projected immortality of the soul with a timeless standard of self-knowledge and ethical virtue, there is sufficient indication that Socrates’ particular notion of immortality is more a balanced and grounded concept than the more idealistic and transcendental projections of Plato.

As Vlastos (1992:53) has convincingly demonstrated, ‘as Plato changes, the philosophical persona of his Socrates is made to change’ – the earlier Socratic dialogues are reasonably faithful but the later dialogues are increasingly projections of Plato’s growing utopian and elitist idealism. Saul (1997:59) makes the interesting argument that the Plato who wrote The Republic not only betrayed the Socratic model of disinterested and participatory reasoning (and its associated universal spirituality) – the ‘legitimate doubter in a democracy’ - but did so by discreetly restoring or rationalizing the ‘Homeric concept of the inevitably of the Gods and Destiny’.

Linking all these points together, we might develop a profile of Socrates as the innovative interpreter of a ‘universal spirituality’ inherent also in the religious aspects of the Greek pantheon of gods. As suggested by the Thompson quote at the outset of this section, Socrates’ avowed sense of spirituality included but went beyond the ancient Greek formalization of the ‘will of the gods’ as a religious foundation of and circular justification for human laws. The distinction between the spirituality of Socrates and the religious standard of piety upheld at Socrates’ trial by representatives of the polis is one which can be compared to those imposed on people
and that which – linked by Socrates with the concepts of self-knowledge as well as ethical virtue – inherent to human individuals in and across every cultural tradition and context.

In this way, the model or example represented by Socrates was not so much a ‘cause’ of the future emergence of a modern secular society but actually a remedy for this which is consistent with (a) notions of a sense of the sacred in comparative religion (e.g. Eliade 1956, Campbell, 1972; Smith, 1991) and (b) associated projections of a both personal and shared or social sense of conscience which is universally referenced ‘internally’ rather than in relation to the vagaries of often manipulated or distorted public opinion.

As Arendt (1989) conceived it, Socrates’ discovered a mode of immortality which effectively transformed the ancient Greek heroic model of mortals aspiring to achieve ‘immortal deeds’. In other words, the ultimately futile traces and external references of publicly recognized works and deeds per se in time are ‘redeemed’ for Socrates by the rather ‘internal’ capacities for self-knowledge, ethical virtue and a more universal standpoint for ‘symbolic action’ or ‘living as if’ despite the apparent confusion and meaninglessness of surface events in human affairs.

**Socrates elenchus method and the productive gap between close-minded (arrogant) ignorance and open-ended (potentially wise) ignorance**

*My art of midwifery... I am not myself at all wise... but those who converse with me profit... they all make astonishing progress... the many fine discoveries to which they cling are of their own making. But to me and the gods they owe their delivery.* (Socrates in Plato’s Theaetetus, 150 b-151d)

*Well although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is - for he knows nothing and thinks that he knows: I neither know nor think that I know.* (Socrates in Plato’s Apology, p. 7)

*Again and again, the schools which form the twentieth century’s elites throughout the West refer to their Socratic heritage... In reality the way they teach is the opposite of a Socratic dialogue... With the*
contemporary elites every question produces an answer [not the aporia of emergent knowledge-building]... Socrates would have thrown the modern elites out of his academy.

– Saul (1993:116)

The young Kierkegaard’s thesis was that Socrates’ peculiar sense of irony somehow signaled the transitional move towards the emergence of modern society and its associated ethos of individualism in the West. This interest in Socrates’ ‘ironic absolute negativity’ provided an important reference point for Kierkegaard’s own conception of a modern notion of religious faith (i.e. often characterized as ‘the leap of faith’). As will be discussed further below, such a misreading of Socratic ironic motivation also ignores the nature of Socratic spirituality. Additionally, there is the puzzling dilemma that ultimately Kierkegaard’s thesis sides with Aristophanes’ negative portrayal of Socrates in his play The Clouds as somewhat of a figure of fun as a more accurate representation than that of either Xenophan or Plato. This is despite Aristophanes’ curious reversal of casting Strepsiades as the eiron figure who employs aspects of Socratic irony against the alazon character representing Socrates. Yet, an older and wiser Kierkegaard was moved to concede that he was wrong in underestimating the achievement of Socrates and the nature of how the ironical motivation and implementation of his elenchus method was a productive approach to knowledge building:

Influenced as I was by Hegel and whatever was modern, without the maturity really to comprehend greatness, I could not resist pointing out somewhere in my dissertation that it was a defect on the part of Socrates to disregard the whole and only consider numerically the individuals. What a Hegelian fool I was! It is precisely this that powerfully demonstrates what a great ethicist Socrates was (Journals 3 A 477, Cited in Perkins, 2001:186).

As Kierkegaard’s words attest, it was not just a few aggrieved members of the ancient Athens polis who either fearfully or patronizingly depicted Socrates as a merely clever and opportunistic ‘sophist’. Hegel, Nietzsche, and others in the history of Western philosophy have also been guilty of this. At stake is the problem of
firstly distinguishing Socrates’ conception of knowledge from that of the Sophists, and secondly of interpreting the function or purpose of his famous elenchus method – the ironic Socratic questioning technique. As reported in Plato’s *Dialogues*, Socrates regularly accused the Sophists of his day of being clever deceiving mercenaries who believed in nothing but taught people how to appear or pretend to be knowledgeable. Thus, for instance, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates is critical of how the Sophists are being employed to train politicians in the art of clever persuasion without any apparent real interest in questions of truth and the wise and meaningful practice of knowledge. This is despite the term ‘sophist’ being derived from the Greek word for wisdom.

The central distinction to be made between not only the methods but also disputed purposes of Socrates on the one hand, and those of the Sophists on the other, lies in an adequate interpretation of the ironic motivation and implementation of Socrates’ elenchus method. In Plato’s *Dialogues* this is the method and process which typically inform Socrates’ exchanges with people - including a series of Sophists such as Protagoras and Gorgias. For instance, the already mentioned exchange with Euthyphro on the topic of piety follows the typical pattern.

As was regularly the case, Socrates’ initially purports not to know how to understand the concept of piety and, deferring to the projected wisdom about this of Euthyphro, looks to him to provide a convincingly universal definition. Euthyphro’s initial efforts at providing a definition and argument are then picked apart by Socrates in terms of their limitations or contradictions. Efforts to clarify his assumptions or to extend and renew further definitions and arguments ultimately with Euthyphro being confronted with the circularity and contradiction of his discussion. Variations of this communication pattern inform all Socrates’ engagements with identified Sophists and also others.

Socrates use of the so-called ‘elenchus method’ of inquiry through dialogue based around a question-and-answer format is generally acknowledged as a seminal prototype for the scientific method. The connection is usually made in terms of
Socrates’ rigorous and uncompromising challenge to any pretence, contradiction, or distortion which would obstruct the apprehension or adherence to universal principles and standards of knowledge (e.g. Vlastos, 1992: chapter 4; Sott, 2002). Some like Aristotle have approached the Socratic elenchus method as a prototype of an inductive model of the scientific method, and others focus on it as ‘negative method of hypothesis elimination’ suggesting it is more an indirect version of the hypothetico-deductive model derived from Aristotle. But as some critics have argued (e.g. Gadamer, 1980:21) such selective and ‘logical’ perceptions of the Socratic method often generally ignore the various educational as well as rhetorical functions and communicative functions.

There is another issue to be explained or clarified. Socrates’ ‘elenchai’ or ‘guided question-and-answer threads of inquiry’ typically end up as ‘aporia’ (i.e. seemingly un-resolvable or impossible queries) rather than direct answers. In other words, the apparent understanding achieved by Socrates’ respondents seem to mainly reside in the ‘negative’ realization that their own assumptions are limited, inadequate, and contradictory. Thus, for instance, although picking up on Vlastos’ suggestion that Socrates’ elenchus method is a knowledge building process of sorts, Benson’s (2001) systematic study of the elements and premises informing Socrates’ method is so focused on particular discrete applications that it struggles to recognize the convergent purposes, knowledge-building process and ultimately ‘spiritual’ motivation at work. In other words, those expecting simple clear-cut resolutions or answers are likely to become provisionally confused or disappointed.

Is there something ultimately or emergently more productive and purposeful about the Socratic elenchus method? As suggested in the quote at the beginning of this section, the answer to this question lies in Socrates general characterization of himself as a ‘mid-wife’ and his purposes to encourage in others the ‘discovery’ process of developing greater knowledge and understanding. The passage where Socrates is reported as outlining his ‘art of midwifery’ culminates in a challenge to his friend Theodorus’s promising student Theaetetus to respond to the question ‘what is knowledge?’. Also
pointing out that many people ignore or repress the insights he helps them with, Socrates’ challenges Theaetetus to put up with the ‘pangs of birth’ and ‘bring to birth’ the new emergence of a greater understanding through a productive engagement with a particular question or problem. It is well known that Socrates’ ‘ignorance’ is ironically projected as a tool to embarrass and even humiliate clever people. But, in the famous example of Socrates’ engagements with Meno’s slave-boy (pp. 231-236) we have evidence of the missing link which helps clarify the overall Socratic method, its educational purposes, and also Socrates’ claim that his provisional goal is to induce the required humility to then go on to genuinely understand and develop greater knowledge and wisdom.

To demonstrate his idea that humans have innate powers of knowledge recollection Socrates selects one of the slave-boys nearby and guides him to effectively undertake and understand a basic geometry exercise. Typically, this episode is interpreted as evidence rather of Plato’s notion that there are transcendent universal ideas which people can ‘recollect’. While, there are some convergences in Plato’s ‘idealistic’ and Socrates’ ‘elenchic’ notions of recollection, arguably a significant difference may be discerned reflecting their distinct purposes, motivations and basic views of the human condition. Examples such as Meno’s slave-boy, illustrate how Socrates also aimed to provoke those who think they are really ignorant and know nothing into recognizing that the really do know much more than they think. In this way, the Socratic notion of learning as ‘recollection’ is outlined in the _Meno_ – mainly focused on the notion of ignored or under-estimated innate human capacities (as distinct from Plato’s retrospective idealism) which his method aims to ‘bring to birth’. Likewise, we have a clear picture of how Socrates’ notion of a teacher facilitating ‘emergent knowledge-building’ in active learners may similarly be distinguished from the modern transmission model of teaching in terms of information transferred to passive learners as it was from the Sophist model of acquired cleverness.

Thus, the elenchus method was conceived as a process of assisting and even provoking people to navigate the gap between
‘what they know’ and ‘what they don’t know’. As the other quote at the outset of this section reports, Socrates encouraged his students to recognize that those who are more humble and open-minded about the limitations of their knowledge had a great advantage over those ‘who don’t know what they don’t know’. A recurrent theme in the Socratic dialogues is that open or humble ‘ignorance’ is potential wisdom (i.e. ‘wise ignorance’) in comparison with close-minded or pretentious ignorance (i.e. arrogance). Thus, the process of dialogue or dialectic – especially where a teacher acts as a guide - is the way in which the most effective knowledge is developed like a rigorous thread of truth-making which can sufficiently and provisionally be enhanced by inquisitive and even provocative ‘probes’. What is largely missing from Plato’s and Aristotle’s distinct idealistic and realistic adaptations of this is how the inquiry process of question and answer itself provides a dynamically universal reference-point which connects to both the human potential and motivation for self-knowledge, ethical virtue and a dynamically practical universal standpoint. In this way, if we go beyond the rationalistic or empirical surface of human knowledge-building we discover the endless aporia of definitions and exemplary situations in conflict with projected perceptions or beliefs.

The more indirect, emergent and inherently dialogical approach to knowledge-building exemplified by the elenchus method not only provides a means to resolve fundamental contradictions and problems of knowledge and understanding by opening up, comparing, and contextualizing these as a process of question and answer. As Socrates’ understood, the related processes of thinking and communicating in effect constitute the means and ‘thread’ by which universal truths are grasped in practice – via the connection between the general and specific aspects or dimensions of any question aiming to encourage inquiry or knowledge building. Thus, implicit in Socrates’ method of simple language use embodied in practice are two distinct stages and also trajectories of knowledge building which perfectly anticipate those articulated in Paul Ricoeur’s (e.g. 1976; 2004) ‘post-modern’ dialogical hermeneutics: (a) in terms of his distinction between a deconstructive modern hermeneutics of suspicion (including the ideas of figures such as Kierkegaard as
well as Nietzsche, Derrida and all other critical relativisms which have dominated modern times) and an emergent hermeneutics of reconstruction or convergence on the other (the latter still to be developed as a global social or cultural paradigm which might overcome or replace the modern paradigm of the former); (b) the corresponding trajectories of a naïve understanding giving way to or being challenged and deconstructed in terms of critical explanation on one hand, and on the other the re-framing or re-configuration of ‘critical explanation’ as a provisional phase rather than fixed perspective (i.e. absolute/objective vs. relative) giving way to an applied convergence of deep knowledge and understanding transferable to and across different contexts.

In this way, we are better prepared to revisit the question of the essential motivation and ironic strategy of ‘reversal’ (verbal, situational and ‘philosophical’) which regularly informed Socrates’ conception and application of the elenchus method. As outlined at the outset of the section, we saw how Kierkegaard alternately equated this with both: (a) a clever rather than wise irony in similar fashion to the Sophists; but also (b) with a retrospectively projected and a typically condescending modernist irony which has lost interest in and refuses to believe that human motivation or basic intentionality (i.e. one of the key aspects of self-knowledgeable) is ‘knowable’ or even relevant anymore.

But, in the light of the ‘mid-wife’ insight into the connection between Socrates’ aspiration for human-knowledge and his own educational motivation, we are able to recognize that ultimately ‘clever’ methods of both verbal and situational irony are strategically linked and applied by Socrates in terms of the greater and motivationally redeeming irony which Kenneth Burke has called ‘consubstantial irony’ — the ethical virtue but also educational potential of being able to reciprocally empathize with others in whatever situation as a case of ‘there for the grace of God go I’.

Likewise, an older and wiser Kierkegaard was ready to concede that the apparently modern ‘infinite negativity’ of Socrates’ ironic method was likewise redeemed by a greater ethical and, indeed, spiritual dimension.
Following Kierkegaard’s modernist conception of religious faith, reference is sometimes made to the hermeneutic circle that ‘one needs to believe in order to understand spiritual truth’. However - with some irony and in preparation for a renewed elenchus or knowledge-building dialogue on the matter - Socrates might have replied to this that universal spiritual truth not only precedes but is potentially obstructed by modern questions of religious faith or belief. In short, the strategic irony of Socrates’ elenchus method may be more accurately interpreted as the bridge between not just ‘internal’ (indirect) and external (direct) notions of individual and society but - as will be explored further in section three below - the timeless immortality of a self-knowledge which also bridges the universal and specific in human affairs.

Socrates anticipation of ‘universal spirituality’ and 21st Century global knowledge convergence

It weighs heavily in favor of Socrates that he alone among the great thinkers – unique in this as many other respects – never cared to write down his thoughts; for it is obvious that no matter how concerned a thinker may be with eternity, the moment he sits down to write his thoughts he ceases to be concerned primarily with eternity and shifts his attention to leaving some trace of them – Arendt (1989:20)

‘An intelligent word is accompanied by wisdom and, being “graven in the soul of the learner”, can defend itself, and knows when to speak and when to be silent’. ‘You mean’ Phaedrus asked, ‘the living word of knowledge has a soul, and of which the written word is properly no more than an image?’. ‘Yes’, replied Socrates, ‘Of course that is what I mean’ – from Plato’s ‘Phaedrus’

It is perhaps Ong (1982) better than anyone else, who recognized that Socrates’ famous suspicion of writing (for ‘destroying memory... and weakening the mind’, etc.) represents a kind of anticipatory antidote for the ‘decay of dialogue’, the forgetting of ‘oral memory’ capacities, and the passive literalism of written and print technologies in the historical emergence of modern society in the West – which, of course, derives centrally from Socrates via
the ‘idealistic’ writings of Plato. The spiritual dilemma or aporia which the quote above touches upon is deepened by the apparent further contradiction of Ong’s additional claim that writing has also been ‘consciousness raising’ for humanity: “the highly interiorized stages of consciousness in which the individual is not so immersed unconsciously in communal structures are stages which, it appears, consciousness would never reach without writing” (p.178).

Likewise, Derrida (1983) one of the most influential (although not necessarily one of the wisest) philosophers of the Twentieth Century generally based his famous ‘deconstruction’ theory around his interpretation of Socrates’ ambivalent resistance to written words as a kind of ‘pharmakon’. As Derrida explores in an essay in Disseminations, ‘pharmakon’ is an ancient Greek medicinal word referring alternately and ambivalently to both a remedy and poison but also associated with the annual ritual sacrifice of a scapegoat in ancient Athens to expel threats to or perceived ‘evils’ within the social order. On this basis, as a means of challenging what he identified as the ‘logocentric metaphysics of presence’ in the Western and modern thought derived from Plato, Derrida went on to argue in other works (e.g. his essay “White Mythology”) that effectively the ideas and actions of people are trapped within ‘language’ and thus also poisoned or alienated by the dead metaphors which he held to inform any human system of representation. In this way, Derrida further argued that the ideas and example of Socrates were not a confirmation but rather an expelling or ‘forgetting’ of social and even personal conscience – indirectly supporting Derrida’s own suggestion that human knowledge is a closed and superficial system of anti-humanist inevitability.

As Ong recognized, ‘writing’ represents one of the various ‘technologies of the word’ (alphabetic, typographic, etc.) which at the turn of the last century increasingly involved the electronic or digital ‘multimedia’ of new information and communication technologies. Although his earlier work was a key influence on McLuhan’s optimistic projections of an emerging ‘global village’, Ong himself was more ambivalent about the rise of what he called the new ‘secondary orality’ as younger generations migrated from
writing and print technologies to the new media of multimedia, hypermedia and digital telecommunications. As he points out, an older generation of teachers, parents, and citizens are almost identically suspicious of computers and, by extension, the ‘internet’ in similar fashion to Socrates’ view of writing – or rather the passively literal modes of thinking which writing can encourage in terms of uncritical habits of reading. Proponents of both basic and cultural literacy education similarly, thus, worry about the dangers of a younger generation contending with the multiple literacies of visual media and the hybrid language use of online communications (e.g. Kress, 2003). In other words, does this emerging ‘secondary orality’ (and associated ‘re-tribalization’ of society) represent the complete and final alienation or ‘interiorisation’ of humanity at both the individual and social levels or is there some way in which a ‘lost’ realm of human community, dialogue and intimacy may be recovered? Are the ideas, methods, and ‘universal spirituality’ of Socrates completely irrelevant to the 21st century age and global society – or might they represent a paradigm of knowledge-building which was long ago anticipated and even more relevant to the challenges of the 21st century than their seminal influences on Western and modern thought in the past?

Socrates’ reported suspicion of and resistance to writing is most notably outlined in the Phaedrus and more indirectly referred to in the Phaedo and Thaetetus. In the Phaedrus, where writing is also linked to the representation of images in paintings and other media, Socrates tells Phaedrus that various assertions or promises that writing will make humans wiser and have better memories are not accurate and in fact likely to produce the opposite. Likewise, in the Phaedo (e.g. p.114) Socrates equates the propensity for ‘forgetting’ in written or generally superficial forms of acquired knowledge with the corresponding sophistic or argumentative ‘art of illusion’ in terms of a common ignorance and even denial of the principle of universal truth. As the quote from the Phaedrus at the outset of this section suggests, Socrates was not so much against writing itself but either intentions or technologies which would obstruct the ‘living word of knowledge’ and associated senses of
‘recollection’ and spirituality. Written words can also be graven in ‘the soul of the learner’. But, this is much less likely so than in either silent thinking or in actually speaking and communicating with others. In this way, Socrates’ suggests that ‘lovers of learning’ use their reflective reasoning for self-knowledge and dialogue for going beyond the ‘data of the senses’ to recollect the universal qualities of the ‘Beautiful and Good and reality of that kind’ (Phaedo, p.97). Thus, the dialogical aspect of Socrates’ elenchus method itself provides the means for ever cutting through confused or even false or intentionally distorted perceptions, memories and beliefs to regain sight of universal truth and ethical virtue.

In the light of Ong’s framework, we might further recognize that Socrates’ suspicion of the ‘fixing’ of meaning, the forgetting of motivation and the distortion of communication through language use is linked to the ‘literalisation’ and associated ‘formalization’ of human thinking – identified by Ong as the by-product of the historically emerging ‘technologies of the word’ and the forgetting of ‘oral memory’. In addition to his rhetorical strategy of irony in the rigorously ‘logical’ as well as ‘pedagogical’ application of his elenchus method, Socrates also demonstrates his mastery of concrete metaphors for abstract concepts (e.g. his characterization of himself as a ‘mid-wife’). This is in ostensibly similar fashion to the Sophists’ rhetoric of persuasion, but rather for knowledge building purposes. Socrates’ use of metaphor to aid the elenchic process demonstrates that he recognized how metaphor does not just ‘represent’ reality in the manner of an image but involves a cognitive function which aids greater, more productive and even more accurate thinking and communication for knowledge building.

To put this another way, Derrida may have been right to accuse Plato of imposing an idealistic rationality and morality on his view of the speaking-writing ‘transition’ (and his representation of Socrates and ‘virtue’) - but this does not mean he was not equally guilty of doing the same (if inversely). In his The Rule of Metaphor (1977) Ricoeur took issue with Derrida’s reductive characterization of metaphor in the history of human thinking and communication as the distortion of ‘dead forms’. Rather Ricoeur points out how as a
function of communication which incorporates literal or logical perspectives, ‘metaphor’ ever involves a localized yet universal aspect of ‘productive imagination’ or *innovation* which irrepressibly builds on or goes beyond the *sedimentation* of past concepts and ideas in terms of a merely ‘reproductive’ imagination. Likewise, others have recognized how the use and not just abuse of metaphor pertains to the cognitive function of all scientific modeling and theorization on one hand, and of everyday colloquial communication in and across different social and cultural contexts (e.g. Hesse, 1966; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

Like Derrida, Ricoeur locates the linguistic function of metaphor in the verbal act of predication. Derrida identifies the exemplary form of verbal predication (i.e. the copula or the verb ‘to be’) as a perpetually supplemental ‘poisoning’ or distortion of human thought through typically visual metaphors (hence, his characterization of Plato’s written representation of Socrates as just such a supplementation). Ricoeur rather also represents the *cognitive* as well as *linguistic* function of the both communicative and representational act of predication as the exemplary locus of how any human individual within any particular social and cultural as well as physical context is ever able to generate ‘a surplus of meaning’ by which to innovate past sedimentations of personal as well as shared or social knowledge and memory. As Ricoeur characterizes it, any concrete context for the performative as well as verbal act or event of predication involves a function of ‘metaphorical reference’ which contextualizes a speaker’s or writer’s interaction with the world in terms of bridging the *singular identification* of self and a world of ‘basic particulars’ and the *universal predication* of various contexts of possibility or application. In this way, Ricoeur not only challenged Derrida’s concept of inevitably supplemental ‘textuality’ but also at the same time provided a framework for recognizing how and why Socrates’ ‘resistance’ is not to writing and other ‘technologies’ of the Word *per se*, but rather to the misuse of language to persuade others, to distort knowledge or communication, and to obstruct the process of knowledge building. Ricoeur (2004: chapter 1), thus, describes a
dialogical ‘intersection’ between Plato’s idealistically utopian and Aristotle’s realistic notions of the reflective link between human memory and imagination.

The knowledge building function of metaphor outlined by Ricoeur and also popularized in the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) has particular relevance for a 21st century context of knowledge-building on several fronts. Firstly, it provides a context for challenging representations of any human language or knowledge system as a closed off ‘prison’ of thought and communication. As Ricoeur (1976) puts it, any human event of meaning making through language or action potentially opens up an innovative and productive ‘surplus of meaning’. This is in similar fashion to Socrates’ productive approach to the gap between ‘what we know’ and ‘what we don’t know’. Ricoeur’s notion that metaphor is a cognitive function and not just a superficial aspect of description or form likewise provides a pivotal basis for: (a) recognizing the dialogical equivalence between speaking and the ‘semantic autonomy’ of any written text; and, on this basis, (b) recovering the importance of intention and motivation in human knowledge construction as well as communication in corresponding terms to the function of self-knowledge within Socrates’ elenchus method. As Gadamer (1980:4) outlines in similar terms, Socrates’ dialogical approach exemplifies a common structure of human understanding and communication which has universal and not just cross-cultural relevance – especially in times or on occasions when people tend to ‘vacillate inconsistently’ (Richards, 2009c).

The importance of metaphor for knowledge building in the digital age is similarly reinforced in related ways. In contrast to ‘industrial age’ views of technology in terms of the reduction or mechanization of parts, the digital age more obviously depends on metaphors for describing interdependent and progressively convergent multimedia functions and virtual or online interactions. As evidenced by search engine algorithms and voice-to-text translation technologies which rely on patterns of language use, the increasingly interactive and personalized functions of new ‘Web 2.0’ technologies might seem on the face of it to be functions of artificial intelligence - but
are more accurately functions of natural human languages (e.g. Manovich, 2001). Likewise, the crucial role of the ‘graphic user interface’ on interactive screens in popularizing digital technologies indicates how new interactive media are designed in terms of the human capacity for metaphorical thinking. Not only is it difficult to conceptualize the various information and communication functions of networked computers without relying on such metaphors as ‘the internet’ and ‘World Wide Web’. While also framed very much by such technologies, it is important to remember that similarly emerging notions of a global network society are ultimately metaphors of social networking involving individual as well as group agents or nodes of interaction. Thus 21st century ‘technologies of the Word’ provide a foundation for the increasing recognition of global human inter-dependence and the growing need for greater intercultural dialogue or communication and knowledge sharing or convergence (Richards, 2009b).

Many of the aspects of such developments (e.g. children ‘reading’ multimedia not books, and the informal shorthand ‘writing’ characteristic of ‘text messaging’) might be viewed pessimistically in terms of what Ong calls ‘secondary orality’. But, there is perhaps a redeeming, more optimistic side to such developments where the knowledge-building methods of Socrates and their associated notion of ‘universal spirituality’ perhaps remain more relevant than ever. This is not just in the developed world but also in relation to those societies and individuals less advantaged (Richards, 2009d).

In the final lines of the Platonic dialogue in his name which reports the death of Socrates, Phaedo describes how all his friends view Socrates as not just the ‘best’ and ‘wisest’ man of his time – but also the most ‘just’ (p. 148). At his trial Socrates is reported as acknowledging that: “if any one likes to come and hear me… whether he be young or old he is not excluded. Nor do I converse with only those who pay; but anyone, whether he be rich or poor may ask and answer me and listen to my words” (p.20). He likewise admits his ‘carelessness’ or lack of interest in wealth, pretension or social intrigue (p.23). He is not embarrassed that he lives in ‘utter poverty by reason of my devotion…to the spiritual duty of
Socrates, Spirituality and the 21st Century... 53

encouraging thinking and even wisdom in others’ (p.9). Just as the Socratic elenchus method of dialogical questioning is inextricably linked to the universal spirituality and self knowledge of an ‘examined life’, so to there are various references which support the idea that Socrates was a man who in action and not just in words applied an egalitarian or non-elitist ethos of viewing all others as neither superior or inferior to himself in principle. This was exemplified by not just his view of how ‘wise ignorance’ has in many ways a knowledge building advantage over pretentious arrogance. As his ‘slave boy’ demonstration to Meno suggests, Socrates was no great respecter of pretention because he saw people in terms of a potential for learning and knowing which was significantly underestimated by most – that is, in terms of their inherent spirituality and ethical virtue as well as innate capacity for ‘recollection’.

Saul (1992; 1996) has keenly argued that Socrates’ ideas: (a) have been systematically compromised by a top-down rationalism and elitism which stretches from Plato through to modern elites in the West; and (b) yet still constitute an exemplary model for the possible future achievement of a ‘citizen-based society’ based on basic concepts of ‘disinterest’ and ‘participation’. In short, he recognizes the universal relevance of how Socrates’ “ethical, humanist democratic line stretches across 2500 years, free and independent of the evolving specifics of economics, technology, intellectual elitism and military force amongst other periodic expressions of the Western” (Saul 1996:61).

Thus, above all, Socrates’ ideas represent a still relevant antidote for the ‘us vs. them’ and ‘self vs. other’ models of human communication and social organization which provide the retrospective rationalization for the 20th century accelerations of poverty, inequity, and disadvantage in the world in ostensibly inevitable terms of cultural, economic and political as well as intellectual condescension. Additionally, the enduring relevance of Socrates’ ideas lie in their challenge to not just ‘elitism’ but modes of thinking determined by literalism, fixed hierarchies and an either/or inflexibility (Richards, 2009a). Yet, in his admiration for what he views as Socrates’ model of reason guided by ‘civic motivation’ (i.e. a still
somewhat naïve notion of humanism) Saul tends to ignore how this is both tied to and framed by a more fundamental aspiration and reference-point which we have earlier explored in terms of Socrates’ ‘universal spirituality’. In other words, we need to understand the wider spiritual as well as oppositional notions of how for Socrates’ universal standards of truth lie in the dynamic process of ‘dialogue’ in every sense of the word – that is, the dialogue with self as well as with others and the world at large.

The relevance of Socrates’ ‘universal spirituality’ for a 21st century context of anticipated global knowledge convergence might be usefully approached in terms of Ong’s (1981:179) concluding observation that “orality-literacy dynamics enter integrally into the modern evolution of consciousness toward both greater interiorization and greater openness”. As indicated earlier, Ong’ was not sure how to interpret the larger or future significance of the kind of ‘secondary orality’ which is increasingly being demonstrated in a younger generation globally in relation to the ‘new literacies’ of digital technologies. Like other media commentators (e.g. Neil Postman) he recognized that this could be associated somehow with a ‘dumbing down’ of human consciousness. Yet, just as writing had interiorized consciousness in some important evolutionary sense (Ong used Neumann’s work as his model) so too he believed that the further ‘technologising of the word’ in the electronic age might have some positive outcome. Indeed, such thinkers as Manuel Castells argue that social networking technologies are helping to make possible a new kind of human society (i.e. a global ‘network society’). But, what do such transformations in the human experience of the interaction between individual and society and increasingly blurred distinctions between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ notions of reality construction have to do with either Socrates or spirituality?

More contemporary frameworks which propose a modern concept of universal spirituality provide a basis for re-evaluating not only the past but also future relevance of Socrates’ ‘method’. As suggested by Ong, models of integral consciousness tend to also epitomize a universal notion of spirituality. Following the earlier models of such thinkers as Rudolf Steiner, Sri Aurobindo, and Jean
Gebser, more recent models have either tended to focus on global knowledge convergences between Western psychology and Eastern spirituality, between esoteric or Gnostic and mystical traditions, or between aspects of personal growth and social change (e.g. Thompson, 1981; Gebser, 1986; Wilbur, 2007; McIntosh, 2007). For instance, Gebser’s framework suggests that the example of Socrates anticipated collective transitions in history from *mythical* to *mental* stages to an *integral* mode which more effectively bridges the ‘mortal’ and ‘immortal’ domains of human meaning and awareness. In corresponding notions to the two stages of knowledge-building implicit in Socrates elenchus method, the concept of integral consciousness is typically conceived as a dynamic interplay between *involutionary* and *evolutionary* trajectories of ‘the universal’ in the specificity of human existence. Many such models discuss convergences between a universal and specific sense of self on one hand, and also between notions of individuality and social context on the other. This is not dissimilar to Socrates’ *dialogic* bridging also of internal self—knowledge and external knowledge of the world on one hand, and also on the other his metaphorical and ‘egalitarian’ responses to rigid and formal social hierarchies caught up in ‘literal thinking’.

Socrates’ defining sense of spirituality was neither simply the ‘mystical’ recognition of the universal in the particular *per se* nor a merely ‘Pythagorean’ notion of underlying order and patterns in both nature and number. Socrates’ ‘divine’ duty to self and others involved a knowledge building perspective on the ‘emergent potential’ of the relation between the universal on one hand, and on the other particular contexts of human understanding, experience, and ideas. What continues to set Socrates apart from other thinkers is the both historical and universal range of how his actual life and specific methods of knowledge building continue to exemplify the promise of a future global knowledge convergence for every individual and all kinds of social groups – poor and undeveloped as well as rich and developed.

In sum, Socrates’ unique balancing act of ever finding a sense of spirituality in the ‘particular’ on one hand, and his incorruptible,
egalitarian, and ‘bottom-up’ commitment to encouraging others to become ‘active knowledge-builders’ in every sense of the word on the other, suggest the following: (a) that the basic human motivation of ‘good faith’ is an aspect of self-knowledge which remains the key to the most sustainable and enduring social as well as personal knowledge-building; and (b) that Socrates’ universal spirituality would likely remain immune to some of the ‘new age spirituality’ confusions (e.g. people ‘losing themselves’ to a ‘guru with unresolved issues’) and what has been called ‘spiritual materialism’ or ‘spiritual narcissism’ (e.g. Trongpa, 1973). Socrates’ key insight and motivation that knowledge is not sustainable if conducted in ‘bad faith’ informed his sacred commitment to encouraging others to build (or, more to the point, ‘recollect’) their own universal ‘thread’ of knowledge-building. There is a strong basis to argue that such ideas still represent an exemplary, timely, and also anticipated paradigm for an emergent human condition at the ‘edge’ of a projected stage of integral consciousness and global knowledge convergence.

CONCLUSION

Socrates had a significant historical if indirect influence on Western thinking and also modern knowledge in such terms as the emergence of the scientific method and the promise of democracy or active and critical participation in civil society. Besides this, as many of the great 20th century philosophers especially have recognized, Socrates set an ethical, spiritual, and general knowledge-building standard which not only still endures but is arguably yet to be fulfilled or realized. This study has explored a more integrated framework and context for interpreting Socrates’ claim that the application of his dialogical methods of critical thinking and knowledge building: (a) were not only motivated by a personal sense of spiritual duty, but (b) were also aimed at awakening deeper, more relevant and indeed ‘spiritual’ notions of knowledge extending to include aspects of self-knowledge, ethical virtue and a universal ‘thread’ of consciousness – sustainable even in historical times and social conditions of great change, uncertainty, and confusion. In this way, we have considered the proposal that not only does
Socrates’ life and methods continue to exemplify a relevant model of *universal spirituality* but does so in terms of a still timely and anticipatory relevance to the human condition today and the still achievable prospects of a future *global knowledge convergence*.

In relation to this larger inquiry, the study has re-visited and re-connected several aspects of how the historical or actual Socrates might be sufficiently distinguished from the utopian and even elitist idealism of his student Plato - whose not always reliable writings provide our main source for reconstructing the man, his methods, and his motivations. Socrates’ claims that he was motivated by a spiritual duty to encourage the ‘universal consciousness’ of self-knowledge and ethical virtue in others were explored initially in relation to his reported efforts to respond verbally and in action (or ‘non-action’ rather) to the charges of impiety which resulted in his death. In this way, Socrates’ elenchus method was re-considered in convergent ways which include but go beyond its exemplary modeling of rhetorical techniques, critical thinking, and ‘prototypes’ of formal logic, etc. Approached more as an educational and dialogical strategy, Socrates’ efforts to engage others and ‘society’ in general with questions represent more accurately an emergent knowledge-building model of how the most productive as well as universal ‘problem-solving’ requires *humility* in (a) engaging with the perpetual gap (or aporia) between ‘what we know’ and ‘what we don’t know’, and (b) transforming the negative trajectory and arrogance of *close-minded ignorance* into a more sustainable, productive and universally as well as ethically consistent trajectory (and inherently spiritual approach) of rather *potentially wise ‘ignorance’*.

The final section re-considered the question of Socrates’ enduring relevance not only to the modern age but to a 21st century context of great social change and inequity, personal confusion, and increasing ‘technological’ mediation of human knowledge. It took up and explored Ong’s insight that Socrates’ model of thinking may still be a relevant to the dilemmas of an emerging ‘secondary orality’ amongst a younger generation growing up with the emerging new literacies of digital technologies for accessing information and
communicating with others. On this basis the study proposes that Socrates’ dialogical approach to knowledge building: (a) remains the kind of ‘antidote’ increasingly needed to resolve the formal literalism, passive consumerism, and inherent ‘elitism’ or cultural condescension at the heart of the ‘ills’ of modern society; and (b) exemplifies a timeless relevant paradigm of (and timeless standards for) integral consciousness which derives, above all, from Socrates’ personal sense and display in action of universal spirituality.

REFERENCES

[Note: All references above to Plato’s Socratic Dialogues except for the Thaetetus and Phaedrus are from the Bantam Classics version introduced by Eric Segal.]


