



SOCRATES AND FREUD: TALK AND TRUTH

Herman Sinaiko

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I wish we had the space to explore the full ironic meaning and import of this claim to wisdom. But let me mention some of its implications for Socrates' relationships with his friends and students. He denied having any substantial knowledge, so he clearly had nothing to teach and therefore could hardly be said to have students. All that he had, all that he could have, were associates, friends, fellow travelers on the journey toward self-knowledge.

Notice, too, that the Socratic enterprise is essentially communal—conversational, dialogical, if you will. The image of Socrates engaged in the search for wisdom is not that of the solitary thinker meditating alone in his study or ^ on a mountaintop; it is that of a man living in a human community passionately engaged in conversation with his fellow men. Even that most solitary and silent of human activities—thinking—is defined by Socrates in one of Plato's *Dialogues* as “the dialogue of the soul with itself.” So Soc-

rates' friends and associates are not there with him simply because they want to be or because he allows them to be present; they are with him because his enterprise is communal. He needs them as much as they need him. The plurality of voices, the clash of opinions, the attempt to persuade others of what you think you really know, the rigorous and unstinting scrutiny of every opinion, the common search for fallacies, weaknesses, ambiguities, self-deceptions, unfounded certainties—all these and more are essential to that search for self-knowledge.

The young men who followed Socrates about, listening to and conversing with him, were not his students but his associates, and it is as such that he deals with them. The respect that Socrates displays toward his young friends is genuine, not a matter of technique or a form of etiquette; he takes his fellow conversationalists seriously because they are, in the face of the profound ignorance of all of us, his genuine equals in the search for self-knowledge.

This does not mean that Socrates treats them with kid gloves. The gravity of their common enterprise requires that the truth, the knowledge they are all seeking and all need, must take precedence over feelings of inferiority and embarrassment. To engage in the quest for self-knowledge with Socrates may be exciting, but it is not always pleasant or fun, for the questors have to be prepared to admit error publicly, to accept correction from anyone, and to follow the argument wherever it leads, regardless of personal wishes or felt needs. The self-discipline required for participation in the Socratic quest for self-knowledge is exacting and unyielding. Failure to accept and obey that discipline entails the failure of the whole enterprise. Thus, if Socrates is respectful of his friends, he is also extremely demanding of them, both for his sake and for theirs.

Along with offering respect and making demands, Socrates allows his fellow participants complete freedom within their common activity. There is a stringent discipline to observe, but no rules or regulations are laid down in advance to govern the relationship between the parties to the conversation. Both Socrates and his fellow discussants are free to do what they will, to set such rules as they agree on, and to mutually enforce them until they agree to change or ignore them. They jointly decide what is and is not relevant to the conversation as they proceed. Even the question of what is and is not a valid argument is open to discussion. In short, participation in a Socratic conversation is an exercise in freedom.

With this last point I have begun to shift my focus from what Socrates does to and for his interlocutors to what those interlocutors

acquire for themselves from participating in that search for wisdom. What they emphatically do not get from him are any definitive answers to their questions, not because he withholds what he knows but because he genuinely does not know. Of course, many of those who talk with Socrates are convinced that he does know the answers but for some reason refuses to impart them.

It takes considerable insight and maturity to see that Socrates' professions of ignorance are the literal truth. But if his interlocutors don't get answers, what do they gain from talking with him? As interlocutors come to see that Socrates, for all his irony, always means what he says, they come to see that they themselves are participating as equals with Socrates in a genuine quest for knowledge. To realize that is to begin to discover one's own power—to ask, to answer, to judge the adequacy of an answer, to admit error, to rethink a position, to search for the necessary but elusive new insight.

In short, in talking to Socrates one may discover one's own power to do what Socrates does—that is, to think for oneself. This is perhaps the greatest gift Socrates or any genuine teacher can offer, although it is only in part a gift. Necessarily, the discovery of our own freedom and power as thinking beings must be one we make for ourselves. And this, I think, is the secret of Socrates' extraordinary authority and influence, the reason so many of his young friends went on to become eminent and powerful thinkers in their own right, the reason he has served as a source of inspiration to generation after generation of thinkers, the reason we still live in the Socratic era two thousand years after he died.

Before I conclude my remarks about Socrates, let me interject a word about terminology. Socrates generally called his enterprise philosophy. The word, which may have existed before him but which he probably was the first to use with any regularity, means "the love of wisdom." He uses it in part to distinguish himself from the sophists, whose name means "wise ones." Socrates wished to emphasize that he did not claim to have wisdom, as they did; he claimed only to desire it.

But he had another name for his enterprise, a name that he may also have originated. In several of Plato's *Dialogues*, Socrates likens his activity to the work of doctors. But whereas doctors treat the body, correcting its deficiencies and malfunctions, Socrates wishes to treat the soul and correct its disorders. The Greek phrase he used is *psyche therapein*, literally, "therapy for the soul." For Socrates the sickness of the soul that psychotherapy was designed

to cure was if ignorance—not ignorance of this fact or that body of information, but the essential ignorance from which we all suffer, ignorance of ourselves. This ignorance, this sickness, in its most common and virulent form is so deep that we do not know how ignorant we are; we do not even know that we are ignorant. We may not be able to overcome our ignorance of ourselves, but we can overcome our ignorance of our ignorance. That is, we can come to understand that we do not know most, perhaps all, of what we think we know.

Thus, although we may never be able to achieve full knowledge of ourselves, we can be released from the shackles of false knowledge. The discovery of our ignorance of ourselves is identical with the discovery of our freedom. The possibility of human wisdom, according to Socrates, may indeed be severely limited, but from Socratic psychotherapy we can at least learn just how ignorant and free we are.

It is no accident that I concluded my remarks about Socratic discourse with a reference to Socratic psychotherapy. In shifting our attention to Freud and his version of psychotherapy, we shift from a metaphorical to a literal use of the term. Freud was trained as a physician, and it was as a physician that he made his discoveries, developed his ideas, gathered a group of followers and disciples around himself, and organized the international psychoanalytic movement.

If Socrates had no discernible profession, Freud, by contrast, is in large measure defined by his relation to the profession of modern scientific medicine. If Socrates wrote nothing, Freud, by contrast, must have spent a very large proportion of his adult life writing. The standard English translation of his collected works runs to twenty-four sizable volumes, and his correspondence with various figures, if it were ever collected and published, might bulk as large or larger than the published works.

If Socrates founded no single school of thought, Freud explicitly, deliberately, and with enormous success spent years organizing and establishing the international psychoanalytic movement. If Socrates claimed to know nothing, Freud at times seems to claim to know everything, or at least everything important, or, to put it more modestly, to have discovered a method and founded a science that makes it possible to discover everything worth knowing that can be known. If Socrates is noted for his ironic modesty in admitting his ignorance, Freud, by contrast, proudly places his discovery of psychoanalysis alongside Copernicus' heliocentric the-

ory and Darwin's theory of evolution—the three great fundamental discoveries that, Freud says several times in his writings, define our understanding of ourselves, our world, and our place in it.

Freud was not tried and executed by his community as Socrates was, but he was and remains a no less controversial figure. He openly attacks all religious belief as basically neurotic or childish, and he is notorious for finding sex and sexual significance in every aspect of human life, even the most seemingly innocent—one might almost say, *especially* the most seemingly innocent. On the one hand, he defends all sorts of despised perversions as more or less natural, and, on the other hand, he argues that much of our morality is perverse and that most of our claims to rationality, integrity, disinterestedness, and objectivity are self-serving and false. He feels free to dismiss most philosophy as insignificant; to interpret art, literature, politics, anthropology, and economics in his own terms; to attack those of his followers who disagree with him as knaves and fools. He changes his mind and then denies that he has done so. And he is often ambiguous; he sometimes talks as if psychoanalysis might someday be reduced to the neurology and physiology of the brain and central nervous system, and at other times he talks as if every condition of our bodies, even death, is to be understood as a psychological phenomenon. Yet Freud's influence is enormous; we live in a world definitively marked by Freud's thought.

I do not want to enter into the controversies about Freud or to question his stature as one of the foundational thinkers of our time. Instead I want to take his influence for granted and remind you that all of Freud's thought has its source in a single peculiar activity, that activity in which the patient comes into the doctor's office, lies down on a couch in front of the seated doctor, and begins to follow the first and only law of psychoanalysis: to say whatever comes into your mind. Freud's discoveries about dreams, slips of the tongue, neurotic behavior, the several structures of the mind, the existence of the dynamic unconscious—all these and more emerged from his observations of his patients when they engaged with him in that strange conversational activity of free association.

Paradoxically, although everything significant in psychoanalytic thought flows from that process, Freud himself has told us very little about it beyond a few generalities and a large number of anecdotes. Even his famous case studies tell very little about what goes on in a psychoanalytic session. Furthermore, Freud's general discussions of psychoanalytic theory and practice often provide a misleading picture of what such a session is like. I am not going to

present such a picture here, but I would like to discuss several features of psychoanalytic discourse.

In the first place, as is generally known, psychoanalysis is very long, very expensive, very time and energy consuming, and very, very difficult for the patient. Freud was quite clear that unless patients were in considerable pain, un-

less their lives were more or less intolerable, they would not be willing to invest the money, time, and energy and accept the pain that psychoanalysis requires. Why should this be so? Why should saying whatever comes into your mind be so difficult and painful? To make a long story very short, it is because we conceal a great deal that we think and feel, not only from others but from ourselves. For one reason or another, we do not want to admit to ourselves that we have such thoughts or feelings.

In effect, Freud discovered that the range of thought, action, and passion in the human psyche is far larger and far more difficult to get at than was previously understood. He found, further, that much human misery was due to conflicts within the psyche, although sufferers usually failed to realize this and normally thought their unhappiness was due to an external cause they could not control. Like Socrates, Freud found that we are far more ignorant of ourselves than we realize.

Psychoanalysis, then, is the slow, painful process that Freud discovered by which patients, with the help of the analyst, come to understand themselves better. What is important for my purposes is that for Freud this process of self-discovery is essentially dialogical, a conversation between the analyst and the analysand. We cannot discover the truth about ourselves by ourselves; we need to do it with someone else.

This dialogical necessity is built into the human situation. If we could admit to ourselves what we really felt and thought about ourselves and the people around us, we wouldn't be so conflicted that we needed to suppress and hide significant portions of ourselves from ourselves. The very structure of the human psyche is such that the truth about ourselves is accessible only with the direct aid and support of someone we trust more than we trust ourselves. Such people are very hard to find. In fact, Freud thinks that such people cannot be found; they must be made through the long, arduous process of analytic training. What is interesting from my point of view is that the central, irreplaceable element in the training of a psychoanalyst is the training analysis: every psychoana-

lyst, in order to become one, has to go through the analytic process as a patient.

As I noted earlier, in a conversation with Socrates the discussion always tends to grow less and less private and particular and more and more generic. The idiosyncratic concerns of the interlocutor tend to drop away as the more fundamental features of the problem under discussion come into view. In psychoanalysis almost the exact opposite tends to happen. When patients start talking about themselves and their problems, they usually talk in generalized, cliché-ridden terms that reflect common opinion, not their actual experiences. It takes a long time of allowing oneself to reflect on one's feelings to be able to feel and describe them accurately in all their highly individualized reality. Almost always in this process the analysand discovers that a given feeling, which might be named embarrassment or guilt or anger, is based on very specific experiences, frequently from the early years of his or her life. Not until these original experiences are recovered in memory can many of the idiosyncratic, strange, or puzzling features of the general feeling make sense to the person on the couch. In effect, the psychoanalytic dialogue becomes more gossipy as it proceeds, not less so.

Socrates almost never engaged in gossip, in that endless iteration of who did what to whom, when, where, how, and why. For Freud, the gossip we tell about ourselves is not an indulgence but the key to discovering the fundamental features of who and what we are. It is, I think, one of Freud's great discoveries that there is a proper use of gossip that can lead to the perception of significant general truths about what it means to be human.

The truths that emerge from psychoanalytic discourse are discoveries as much for the analyst as they are for the analysand. This point is an important one and is not always appreciated, even by those sympathetic to psychoanalysis. Freud himself is largely responsible for the misunderstanding because he frequently writes as if the analyst understands everything about the patient on the couch and has only to determine the strategy by which the analyst will, step by step, always at exactly the right moment, bring the patient to see the truth.

This image of the all-knowing, all-competent psychoanalyst also feeds conveniently into the fantasies of many analysands, who need, or prefer, to think that their analyst has all the answers. The reality is quite different. Analysts do have at their command a great deal of psychoanalytic theory and experience; they know all about

the Oedipus complex and pre-Oedipal object relations, about repression and regression, about transference and counter transference, about dream theory and parapraxes, and the rest. But when confronted by a particular analysand describing a particular painful experience, the analyst must set aside all that acquired knowledge and simply listen to what is being said. Otherwise the analyst, like the patient, runs the risk of mishearing what is being said and of assimilating it to concepts and categories that are inappropriate and inaccurate.

Analysts, like patients or anybody else, can jump to wrong conclusions, can systematically distort evidence, unintentionally suppress essential data, and so forth. And there are analysts who do these things, who listen for a few minutes and then are completely confident that they know exactly what is wrong with the patient and exactly what needs to be done. There is even a certain understandable tendency among analysts who do not act this way to talk as if they did.

The true situation is an uncomfortable one for analysts as well as their patients. For all their training (or perhaps because of it) psychoanalysts do not know what is wrong with their patients or what to do about it. They don't even know whether the analytic theory and practice are right, whether this patient might not be the one who tests the rule, the patient to whom the theory doesn't apply, the patient for whom the theory needs to be rethought, reexamined, reformulated. In the reality of a psychoanalytic encounter, the analyst is quite ignorant and needs, with the analysand, to rediscover and work out the theory all over again from the beginning. Anything less is likely to result in a less than satisfactory analysis.

What I am arguing here is that every psychoanalysis is a genuine voyage of discovery for both the analyst and for the analysand. But this voyage is not merely an exploration of analytic theory for the analyst; it is and must be a voyage of self-discovery as well. After all, if analysts cannot simply rely on theory to guide and shape the discourse with analysands, because that theory is always—and must always be—uncertain and unreliable, they must fall back on nontheoretical resources. This means, I think, that analysts must rely on their own personal responses to the people with whom they are dealing. The more effectively analysts can individualize their patients, the more personalized their responses will be to each one. In that intimate encounter between two unique individuals, the analyst, like the patient, must encounter himself or herself, as well as the other, in new and surprising ways.

This brings me to a final point about the psychoanalytic process that I find difficult to express accurately and without distortion. A number of features of psychoanalytic practice were thoroughly fixed in analytic dogma for many years. Analysis required that the patient recline on a couch with the analyst sitting out of sight. Analysis required at least three or four or five sessions a week. Analytic sessions all had to be forty-five or fifty minutes long. The patient had to establish a transference neurosis toward the analyst, and so on.

There has been much argument in the psychoanalytic community in recent years about the relative importance of these various doctrines and how they are to be understood. There have also been many changes in theory and in practice. Specifically, serious attention has been given to the nonverbal dimensions of the analytic process and the analytic relationship. But even here, the desired therapeutic outcome of treatment requires that the nonverbal components eventually be reflected, and at least partially articulated, in discourse between analyst and analysand.


If I have been accurate in my sketch of the psychoanalytic process, then the essence of psychoanalysis lies in the character of the talk between the analyst and the analysand. That talk, as I have argued, is difficult to achieve and to sustain, but it is what psychoanalysis is all about. Everything else, all those practices, beliefs, doctrines, and dogmas, are just means to achieve that extraordinary conversation. There is considerable evidence that Freud himself constantly broke the rules—that he had his patients over for dinner, took them on vacations with him, and behaved in all kinds of seemingly unanalytic ways. My point is simply that because these customary practices and doctrines of psychoanalysis are means to an end, they can and should be violated if they do not serve the purpose for which they were intended.

Socrates, too, did many things that seem strange or inappropriate for a philosopher—unless you hold on to the central fact that his aim was to initiate and sustain that extraordinary conversation that constituted his search for self-knowledge. If he had to use bad arguments, tell outrageous stories, and act in strange ways to serve his ends, so be it. Only an arrogant fool who believed he knew the answers beforehand would have been so foolish as to limit the means used to achieve an end he did not yet know how to reach.

With this last remark I have pushed these reflections to the point of suggesting that the strange kinds of talk that Socrates and Freud discovered and pursued with such single-minded devotion were

not, finally, merely means to the end of self knowledge but were intrinsic to the end they pursued. This, in turn, suggests that the end—self-knowledge—is already present in the activity.

The tradition of Western philosophy as we know it begins with Socrates and his discovery that the search for wisdom entails a certain kind of discourse. The tradition started by Socrates has largely ignored his discovery, and for the past twenty-five hundred years philosophers have pursued wisdom in a wide variety of ways, but none that I can think of has attempted to follow the Socratic example by rigorously engaging in Socratic conversation. Maybe the enterprise has not been understood, maybe it is too difficult, or maybe even the philosophers could not bring themselves to believe that Socrates meant what he said.

Whatever the reason, Freud may well be the first thinker since Socrates to take talk as seriously as Socrates did. And that recognition poses both a challenge and an opportunity for us. With Freud as a model, we may be the first thinkers since antiquity who are able to grasp the experience of discourse with which Socrates initiated philosophy. Philosophy, the desire and the search for wisdom, is, in the end, the desire and the search for self-knowledge. We might, I suggest, rediscover philosophy for ourselves. That is the opportunity. The challenge is to accept the opportunity. 

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