

Socratic Leadership

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ABSTRACT: What makes a good leader? This paper takes Socrates in Plato's early dialogues as the starting point for developing three leadership skills that are still relevant today: being on a mission, thinking in questions, and thinking like a beginner. I arrive at these Socratic leadership skills through an interdisciplinary approach to Plato's early dialogues that puts Socrates in conversation with a diversity of thinkers: modern-day business leaders and leadership coaches, educators, Zen Buddhists, and art historians. I show that Socratic leadership skills are valued in today's business world, and I propose concrete exercises that can help anyone acquire these skills. In contrast to Platonic leadership—the leadership skills of the philosopher king—Socratic leadership skills have not been the focus of much investigation. This paper aims to advance a scholarly conversation about Socrates as a leadership model.

KEYWORDS: Socrates, Plato, Socratic method, Socratic mission, Socratic questioning

We run the company by questions, not by answers.

—Eric Schmidt, Google's former CEO¹

The best innovators are able to live with not having the answer right away because they're focused on just trying to get to the next question.

—Warren Berger, journalist and author²

1. INTRODUCTION³

What makes a good leader? Several non-academic management consultants and leadership bloggers have proposed that the Socratic art of asking questions is at the core of good leadership.⁴ Some have even proposed that it is “one of [our] best leadership tools.”⁵ I will argue that these popular management consultants and leadership bloggers are onto something that is worth investigating

more fully. I will propose that Socrates exemplifies important leadership skills when he questions people in the way characteristic of Plato's early dialogues.⁶ This paper will investigate three Socratic leadership skills in detail and apply them to the business world.

While Socratic leadership has received quite a bit of attention outside of academia in popular discussions of business leadership, it has not been the focus of significant scholarly philosophical investigation; and despite excellent interdisciplinary work on leadership in Plato's middle and late dialogues,⁷ scholars have yet to develop a comprehensive understanding of leadership in Plato's early dialogues. Thus, an opportunity for scholarly progress on the topic of leadership through an exchange between ancient Greek philosophy and the contemporary philosophy of leadership has remained underexplored. This paper aims to advance a scholarly conversation about Socrates as a model for business leadership.

My central claim is that we can learn three specific leadership skills from Socrates that are highly valued in today's business world:

- *Being on a mission*: While many of us do not know why we do what we do, Socrates has a strong sense of purpose.
- *Thinking in questions*: Rather than merely asking good questions, Socrates inspires an entirely different way of thinking. While many of us think in answers, Socrates encourages us to think in questions.
- *Thinking like a beginner*: Socrates cultivates a certain mindset—an open, continuously inquiring mind that is as free as possible from false attachments and that, in this sense, resembles what Zen Buddhists call a beginner's mind.

I will arrive at these leadership skills through an interdisciplinary approach to Plato's early dialogues that puts Socrates in conversation with a diverse group of thinkers—modern-day business leaders, leadership coaches, and bloggers, as well as educators, Zen Buddhists, and art historians. I will show that engaging with these thinkers alongside Socrates enhances our understanding of Socratic leadership skills, allows us to apply Socratic leadership skills to the business world, and helps us identify specific exercises that can help anyone acquire these skills. For each skill, I will show how Socrates exemplifies that skill and how we can teach and acquire it. Finally, I will show that these skills are valuable for students beyond the college classroom: companies want to hire young adults who exhibit Socratic leadership skills. While I will focus on examples from the corporate world, I believe that these Socratic skills can be applied to any leadership context, from running a company to running a city, a family, or even one's own life.⁸

2. SOCRATIC LEADERSHIP SKILLS IN PLATO'S EARLY DIALOGUES

Most academic discussions of leadership in Plato have focused on the middle and late dialogues,⁹ specifically on the *Republic* and the philosopher king as a role model of good leadership that can inspire more ethical business practices.¹⁰ With the exception of Santiago Mejia¹¹—who has recently argued that experiencing Socratic ignorance can lead to more ethical business leadership—the Socrates of

Plato's early dialogues has received relatively little attention in academic discussions of business leadership.¹²

While Plato's philosopher king might indeed exhibit characteristics of good leadership—he is “good at remembering, quick to learn, high-minded, graceful, and a friend and relative of truth, justice, courage, and moderation” (*Rep.* 487a)—I do not believe that he offers the most applicable or inspiring lessons on leadership in Plato. For such lessons, I argue, we should turn to the early Socratic dialogues.

The Socratic dialogues present an alternative leader to the philosopher king: Socrates himself. When comparing the philosopher king to Socrates, we can notice three important differences. First, we see Socrates in action in the early dialogues. He thus provides a real role model, a person from whom we can learn how to lead. The philosopher king, by contrast, remains a hypothetical leader. We never see him ruling the city or leading others. Second, the main characteristic that qualifies the philosopher king for leadership is that he has the highest kind of knowledge: he knows the form of the good (*Rep.* 505a, 532b–c), which enables him to know what is fine, just, and good (*Rep.* 479d–484d). Socrates, by contrast, claims that he lacks such knowledge (*Apol.* 21d). The philosopher king, therefore, sends the message that leadership is about having answers, but Socrates shows, as we will see, that leadership is actually about asking the right questions. Third, the philosopher king is the result of an extremely selective and rigorous educational process. Only those who successfully complete thirty-five years of education (in poetry, music, gymnastics, math, astronomy, and dialectic, *Rep.* 376e–540b) and fifteen years of working in the government (*Rep.* 539e) are qualified to rule. If the philosopher king is the blueprint of good leadership, leaders belong to an educational elite. Socratic leadership, by contrast, is a democratic skill; at least in principle, it is open to anyone who is inspired by questions and collaborative thinking, or so I will argue.

To see Socratic leadership in action, I will turn to Plato's *Laches*. In the *Laches*, two young fathers, Lysimachus and Melesias, ask two older and more experienced fathers, Laches and Nicias, for advice: should their sons learn to fight in armor (*Lach.* 181c)? As famous generals, Laches and Nicias seem qualified to advise on this topic. But as it turns out, they disagree about whether young men should learn how to fight in armor (*Lach.* 181e–184c), so they ask Socrates to break the tie. However, instead of taking one side or the other, Socrates raises more questions. Should this question be decided by the majority or by an expert (*Lach.* 184d)? All agree that they need to consult an expert—but an expert on what (*Lach.* 185a–b)? Why, Socrates wonders, do you want your sons to learn how to fight in armor? What do you want to achieve? It becomes clear that the fathers want their sons to become virtuous (*Lach.* 190b). They hope that fighting in armor will instill one virtue in particular: courage. The remainder of the dialogue thus deals with the question, “What is courage?” (*Lach.* 190d). After the men propose and refute several answers, they are at a loss. It turns out that none of the people present—Socrates included—know what courage is (*Lach.* 199e). Thus, Socrates concludes that they should not give advice on whether fighting in armor is courage-promoting but

should instead look for an expert on courage. The men agree, and Lysimachus is particularly eager to continue the search the next day (*Lach.* 201b–c).

What, if anything, can we learn from Socrates in the *Laches* about how to lead a team successfully toward a goal? Initially, we might be inclined to say: not much. At the end of the dialogue, the men still don't know whether it is good to learn to fight in armor. In fact, they end up with even more questions than they started with and thus do not seem to have made any progress at all. However, with a closer look, we can see that the men did make progress: Socrates set the fathers on the right path and helped them get closer to the goal of making their sons virtuous (*Lach.* 179b–e). Below, I will look more closely at this Socratic guidance. I will propose that as Socrates questions people, he helps them sort out their goals and gain clarity about their ultimate goal—living well. In doing so, he exemplifies important leadership skills. I will focus on three of these leadership skills: being on a mission, thinking in questions, and thinking like a beginner.

Skill #1: Being on a Mission

Throughout the early dialogues, Socrates' questions force his interlocutors to pause their daily lives and reflect on why they do what they do. In the *Laches*, Socrates questions *why* the fathers want their sons to learn how to fight in armor; in the *Euthyphro*, he inquires *why* Euthyphro wants to prosecute his father; in the *Protagoras*, Socrates challenges Hippocrates to explain *why* he wants to talk to the sophist Protagoras. When Socrates asks, “Why are you doing what you're doing?” what he is trying to get at is, “What is the thing for the sake of which you do what you do?” (*Lach.* 185d5–8; *Gorg.* 467c–468b)—in other words, “What is the purpose of your action?” It turns out that most people do not really know why they do what they do. They want to be courageous (*Laches*), pious (*Euthyphro*), and virtuous (*Protagoras*), but they are misguided about what courage, piety, and virtue really are.

In the business world, Socrates' question, “Why are you doing what you're doing?” translates into “Why are we in business?” and “What is the purpose of our company?” Leadership theorist Simon Sinek stresses the importance of asking the “why” or “purpose question.” In his book *Start with Why* and his talk “How Great Leaders Inspire Action”—one of the twenty-five most popular TED talks—he argues that having a clear answer to the “purpose question” is the core of good leadership.

Below, I will summarize Sinek's account of leadership. I will then reconstruct a Socratic account of leadership based on Socrates' views on craftsmanship. I will propose that Socrates' and Sinek's accounts are similar in important ways and that an interdisciplinary, comparative interpretation that reads Socrates in light of Sinek allows us to present the first Socratic leadership skill—being on a mission—in a way that is applicable and relevant today.

Sinek, like Socrates, believes that most people do not truly know why they do what they do. To demonstrate this, Sinek distinguishes the purpose of our work—*why* we do what we do—from *what* we do and *how* we do it. It is relatively easy to articulate *what* we do. For example, at Apple, one might say, “We make

computers.” But *how* do we do what we do? This one is a bit trickier. Someone working at Apple might respond, “We make computers that are user-friendly and aesthetically appealing.” While the *what* and the *how* are important, they are not enough to set a business apart. Several other companies also make user-friendly and aesthetically appealing computers. To set us apart, Sinek argues, we must think about *why* we do what we do. But “very few people or companies can clearly articulate WHY they do WHAT they do,” Sinek explains. “When I say WHY, I don’t mean to make money—that’s a result. By WHY I mean what is your purpose . . . ? Why does your company exist? Why do you get out of bed every morning? And why should anyone care?”¹³

In Plato’s early dialogues, Socrates never attempts to define leadership. However, I will show how his views on craftsmanship allow us to draw important inferences. When discussing craftsmanship, Socrates, like Sinek, differentiates between making money and fulfilling one’s purpose (*Rep.* 341b–342e, 344d–347d). Using the example of a doctor, Socrates argues that a doctor, strictly speaking, is not a money-maker but someone who treats the sick by practicing medicine (*Rep.* 341c). The doctor acts for the sake of bodily health; his purpose or goal is to benefit the body (*Rep.* 341e). Making money might be a by-product of practicing medicine, but it is not *why* the doctor does what he does. Socrates argues that this applies to all craftsmen. Each craftsman looks to the benefit of the subject on which he practices his craft (the doctor benefits the body, horse breeders benefit horses, and so forth), and “everything the craftsman says or does, he says or does for it,” that is, for this subject (*Rep.* 342e). In Sinek’s words, everything that the craftsman does, he does for the sake of his WHY.

If we apply Socrates’ understanding of craftsmanship to leadership, we can infer that leaders are not money-makers but people who benefit their followers by leading them toward goals. These goals, Socrates would add, must be truly worth pursuing. For Socrates, true leaders want to benefit their followers and improve their lives. But just as the doctor truly benefits his patient only if health is in fact conducive to living well (*Euthyd.* 278e–281d; *Gorg.* 511e–512b), the leader likewise truly benefits his followers only if their goals are in fact conducive to living well. Living well (*eu zen*) or happiness (*eudaimonia*) is our final goal. Thus, ultimately, the purpose of the Socratic leader is to benefit his followers by leading them toward true happiness. In Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, Socrates defines leadership in precisely this way: a leader is someone who makes whomever he leads happy (*Xen. Mem.* 3.2.4). Knowing how to achieve happiness is, arguably, the ultimate competency of a true Socratic leader.

For Sinek, as for Socrates, successful leaders are driven by a purpose: they want to benefit their customers and improve people’s lives in some way. That is *why* they do *what* they do. It is their *why* that distinguishes these leaders from their competitors and makes people excited about buying their products and working with them. Consider again the example of Apple. For Steve Jobs, Apple was much more than a computer company. Job’s mission was “to make a contribution to the world by making tools for the mind that advance humankind.”¹⁴ It is Apple’s *why*, Sinek explains, that gives this company a distinct goal and purpose that inspires

like-minded people to follow it. Inspired customers and employees follow “not because they have to, not because they were incentivized to, not because they were threatened to, but because they want to.”¹⁵ They want to “act for the good of the whole” because they believe in the company’s mission and in pursuing a shared goal.¹⁶

I propose that Socrates is such a leader.¹⁷ He inspires people to follow him on his mission to become as good as possible by testing himself and others every day and urging others to care most of all for the excellence of their souls (*Apol.* 29d–30b, 31b, 38a).¹⁸ This mission is *why* Socrates does everything he does, *why* he gets out of bed every morning, and *why* he believes there would be no reason for him to stay alive if he had to give up philosophy (*Apol.* 29d, 37e–38a). *What* Socrates offers his followers—the product of his craft—is a better, happier life. As Socrates addresses the jury during his trial, he says that others might make “you think yourself happy,” but “I make you happy” (*Apol.* 36e). Questioning the Athenians is *how* Socrates does what he does. Many others claim to offer the same product—think of famous sophists like Protagoras, who advertises, “If you study with me . . . you will go home a better man” (*Prot.* 318a–b). But what sets Socrates apart is his *why*. He does not run a business selling knowledge like the sophists (*Apol.* 19d)—he leads a movement of people who want to join him on his mission, and he inspires like-minded people, like Lysimachus in the *Laches*, to join him (*Lach.* 201b–c). Socratic leaders are not salesmen, and their followers are not consumers. Instead, Socratic leaders and followers are on a mission together; they share a way of life (*bios*).

Why do you do *what* you do? What is your purpose? Why do you get out of bed every morning? By asking students to reflect on their *whys* and articulate their goals, we can help them develop the Socratic leadership skill of being on a mission. The importance of this skill has been proven repeatedly, especially in times of change and uncertainty. Those with a clear sense of *why* “find it easier to weather hard times or even to find opportunity in those hard times . . . [they] are less prone to giving up after a few failures because they understand the higher cause.”¹⁹ Those with a clear sense of *why* turn their mission statements into *mission questions*—“How can I fulfill my purpose next year, in 30 years, or during a pandemic?”—and they constantly strive to find new ways to realize their purpose.²⁰ Socrates exemplifies precisely this kind of adaptability when he is unmoved by his sentencing and impending death because, as he explains, he can continue to examine himself and others even in the afterlife (*Apol.* 40c–41c).

Above, I proposed that reading Socrates’ account of craftsmanship in light of Sinek’s account of leadership allows us to see in Socrates an important characteristic of a good leader that is relevant for us today: Socratic leaders are on a mission. While many of us wander through life without a clear sense of direction, without knowing *why* we do what we do, Socrates has a distinct reason for getting out of bed every morning: he is on a mission to improve himself and others. It is this mission that inspires people to follow him. I proposed that asking the purpose question—What is your purpose? Why do you get out of bed every morning?—can prompt students to reflect on their goals and on how these goals

relate to the ultimate goal of living well. Asking these questions thus helps us develop the first Socratic leadership skill: being on a mission.

Skill #2: Thinking in Questions

In the *Laches*, Socrates pursues his mission of becoming better at living well by examining himself and others on the topic of courage. The question “What is courage?” becomes the central question of the dialogue. Like the *Laches*, many Socratic dialogues are centered around one such question: “What is piety?” (*Euthyphro*), “What is temperance?” (*Charmides*), “What is a friend?” (*Lysis*), and “What is the fine?” (*Hippias Major*). Socrates arrives at these central questions through a process of questioning his interlocutors’ initial questions. In the *Laches*, Socrates wonders whether the initial question, “Should our sons learn how to fight in armor?” is the right one. “Why,” Socrates asks, “do you want your sons to learn how to fight in armor?” (*Lach.* 185d). This question leads to another question, “What is virtue?” (*Lach.* 190b), and eventually to “What is courage?” (*Lach.* 190d). Let us call this the Socratic *question-finding process*.²¹

The goal of the *question-finding process* is to find the right question, that is, the question that should be tackled first. In the *Laches*, we find that to make any progress on the initial question—“Should our sons learn how to fight in armor?”—we must first answer the question, “What is courage?” And indeed, without understanding what courage is, we cannot know whether or not learning to fight in armor is courage-promoting.

Paul Bennett, creative director at the international design consultancy IDEO and author and speaker on creative leadership, emphasizes the importance of what I call the Socratic *question-finding process*. For Bennett, working with his customers to find the right questions to solve their problems is the central part of his job as a consultant. He explains that many fail because they want quick answers and thus focus on the wrong questions: “What’s the answer to the problem and how do we fix it? We get asked this question a lot.”²² In today’s workplace, however, “It’s not your job to walk into the room with the right answer, but with a great question and have everyone answer it with you.”²³ But how does one come up with “great questions”? How can we learn to identify the questions that must be tackled first?

In the *Laches*, Socrates arrives at “What is courage?” after asking, “Why do you want your sons to learn to fight in armor?” “Why” questions get to the bottom of problems and reveal more foundational questions. Getting into the habit of asking “why” is, thus, a good first step toward asking better questions. To practice asking “why” questions, we can turn to Sakichi Toyoda, founder of Toyota Industries, and his exercise, “the five whys.”²⁴ To determine the cause of any manufacturing problem, Toyoda had his employees ask “why” five times. Imagine, for instance, that Toyota produced faulty parts. To get to the root of the problem, we must ask, “Why were faulty parts produced?” Let’s assume that we identify the culprit: someone made a mistake on the assembly line. But why? Asking why the person made a mistake might uncover an underlying problem, such as insufficient training. Why are employees trained insufficiently? The answer

to this question might be that training is expensive and the company decided to invest in marketing instead. Why? Asking “why” multiple times leads not only to the root of the initial problem—insufficient training—but also to a conversation about how to distribute resources within the company.

Socrates is skillful at identifying questions that need to be tackled first because they get to the root of the problem at hand. I propose that “the five whys” is an effective exercise that can help us better identify such foundational questions. But to master the *question-finding process*, we must broaden our question-asking skills. We must learn to entertain different kinds of questions—not only “why” questions but also “why not,” “what,” “how,” “when,” and “what if” questions—and prioritize among them. In other words, we must learn to *think*, like Socrates, *in questions*. I will propose that the next practice, the *question formulation technique*, can teach us precisely that.

When educators Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana were working for a high school dropout prevention program in a low-income community in Lawrence, Massachusetts, they noticed something surprising: parents did not attend school meetings. Parents were thus not involved in decisions on topics that directly affected their children’s education, such as the school budget, curricula, and disciplinary measures. When Rothstein and Santana reached out to the parents, they learned that parents didn’t attend meetings because they “didn’t even know what to ask.”²⁵ These parents were “pointing to a glaring omission” in education: “being able to generate a wide range of questions and strategize about how to use them effectively is rarely, if ever, deliberately taught.”²⁶ In response, Rothstein and Santana developed the *question formulation technique*, an exercise that teaches the skill of asking good questions. Below, I will walk through the exercise step by step.

First, students are asked to generate as many questions as possible about a particular “question focus,” that is, an idea that jumpstarts *question-storming*.²⁷ When teaching the *Laches*, a possible question focus could be, “Courage is wisdom.” The rules for generating questions are as follows:

- (a) Ask as many questions as you can.
- (b) Do not stop to discuss, judge, or answer any of the questions.
- (c) Write down every question exactly as it is stated.
- (d) Change any statements into questions.

Rothstein and Santana explain that the second rule “emerged as we observed the challenges faced by people who not only rarely ask questions, but whose voices are also rarely respected when they do speak up. Asking a question can be an act of courage, and nothing will as quickly prevent that person from ever taking the risk a second time as hearing a snap judgment that may burst as ‘That’s a stupid question’ or—more subtly, genuinely, or manipulatively—‘Hmm, I think it’s better to think about it this way.’”²⁸ The third rule, to write down questions exactly as stated, prevents others from changing questions (“Oh, so you’re really asking . . .”). Especially as instructors, we tend to try to “improve” student ques-

tions. While this is surely well-intended, it takes away students' full ownership of their questions and often changes the questions themselves.

Afterward, students modify their questions by changing closed-ended questions (questions that can be answered with "yes" or "no" or one word) to open-ended questions (questions that cannot be answered in one word) and vice versa. Consider the question, "Why does Socrates define courage as wisdom?" (open-ended). By transforming the question from open-ended to closed-ended—"Does Socrates define courage as wisdom?"—students realize that an assumption is built into the first question, namely *that* Socrates defines courage as wisdom. But does he?

Next, students prioritize among their questions by selecting three questions and explaining their choices. Depending on the goal of the exercise, the three questions can be those that interest students most or that will help them structure their papers. Finally, they are asked to reflect on their learning experience. What did you learn? What value does it have? How do you feel now about asking questions? After completing this exercise, many of my students reported, "I feel more confident!" Others explained that "the best questions aren't always the ones you think of first" and "the best questions can sometimes be derived from the worst." These are invaluable learning outcomes.

When faced with a question or problem, many of us rush to produce answers and solutions. We are trained to think in answers, but Socrates inspires us to think in questions: he demonstrates the value of questioning our questions and of finding the right question. I showed that thinking in questions is a skill that is highly valued in the business world, and I proposed that the "five whys" and the "question formulation technique" are exercises that can help us and our students acquire this skill.

Skill #3: Thinking Like a Beginner

Above, I proposed that Socrates exemplifies two important leadership skills: he has a clear and strong purpose that guides all of his actions, and he thinks in questions rather than answers, which enables him to come up with great questions. I will now propose that these two skills are part of a particular mindset that is cultivated by Socratic conversations.

To see that Socratic conversations cultivate a certain mindset and that this mindset is valued in the business world, let us return to the *Laches* and Socrates' conversation with the generals. In the *Laches*, Socrates' questions uncover Laches' and Nicias' beliefs about courage. Once he exposes their beliefs, he tests them one by one to see if they have any merit. It turns out that some of the beliefs contradict each other. For example, Laches cannot hold all three of his beliefs—that "Courage is endurance of the soul," "Courage is a fine thing," and "Endurance is not always a fine thing" (*Lach.* 192c–d)—without contradicting himself. If Laches wants to avoid contradiction, he must let go of some of his beliefs.

My brief description of Socrates' conversation with Laches at *Lach.* 192c–d mostly fits with what Gregory Vlastos proposed to call Socrates' "standard *elenchus*," that is, Socrates' usual way of "examining" or "refuting" his interlocutors.²⁹

In the “standard *elenchus*,” Socrates’ interlocutor claims (p). Socrates targets (p) for refutation. In the process, the interlocutor agrees to claims (q) and (r), which, taken together, entail (not- p). Despite the fame of the Socratic *elenchus*, interpretations vary widely. In particular, interpreters wonder what exactly the Socratic *elenchus* accomplishes. Can we conclude that p is false,³⁰ or merely that either q or r or p is false?³¹ I do not here attempt to advance a possible answer to this important question. Instead, I propose a different way of thinking about the purpose of the Socratic *elenchus* that brings out its modern relevance for leadership.

Socrates explains that the purpose of philosophical activity like the conversation we saw in the *Laches* is to care for the soul (*Apol.* 29d–e, 30a–b). I propose that Socratic conversations care for our souls by cultivating a mindset that resembles what Zen Buddhist Shunryū Suzuki calls a “beginner’s mind.” I will show that the idea of a beginner’s mind helps us understand the Socratic mindset and its value for business leadership.

In *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, Suzuki compares the process of examining our beliefs and other mental attachments to a general house cleaning: “When you study Buddhism, you should have a general house cleaning of your mind. You must take everything out of your room and clean it thoroughly. If it is necessary, you may bring everything back in again. You may want many things, so one by one you can bring them back. But if they are not necessary, there is no need to keep them.”³² Suzuki famously calls a successfully uncluttered mind a “beginner’s mind” (*shoshin*).³³

The mental possessions that clutter our minds—beliefs, desires, memories, hopes, and worries—“put a spin” on how we perceive the world, thereby limiting our experience of it.³⁴ The more mental possessions we accumulate, the more limited and closed-minded we become. The Zen parable “A Cup of Tea” compares such a full mind to a full cup of tea:

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868–1912), received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor’s cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. “It is overfull. No more will go in!” “Like this cup,” Nan-in said, “you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?”³⁵

In Zen Buddhism, one acquires a beginner’s mind through meditation. Suzuki recommends a specific kind of meditation: seated meditation (*zazen*). A beginner’s mind is “empty in the sense of being free from delusory discriminations” and false attachments.³⁶ But it is not literally empty (containing nothing). The point of meditation is not to get rid of everything “but rather to replace deluded cravings with the motivational power of the . . . vow . . . to liberate all sentient beings from suffering”³⁷ and to cultivate the “desire for what is good” (*Śāntideva* BCA 7.46). Meditation helps us to return to our original, open mind—the “beginner’s” mind. Such a mind is most fully manifested in someone far advanced in Buddhist practice, but we can all make progress toward it.

Suzuki describes Buddhist practice as a housecleaning of the mind that cultivates the beginner's mind. I propose that we can likewise think of Socratic conversation as a housecleaning of the mind that cultivates a Socratic mindset similar to the beginner's mind.³⁸

Let us return to Socrates' conversation in the *Laches*, this time with a Buddhist perspective. Borrowing from Suzuki, I propose that the purpose or effect of such Socratic conversations is to prompt us to take inventory of our mental possessions. By examining our beliefs and desires, Socratic conversations, like Buddhist meditation, encourage us to unclutter our minds of false beliefs and misguided desires. For Socrates, if we do not have a good reason for keeping a certain belief, we should let it go. Even beliefs that have survived Socratic questioning may be reexamined at a later time.³⁹ Socrates thus cultivates a certain mindset—an open, continuously inquiring mind that is as free as possible from false attachments and that, in this sense, resembles what Suzuki calls a beginner's mind. Like the Buddhist beginner's mind, the "Socratic" beginner's mind is not literally empty. Rather, it is the mind of someone who has come to understand that our most fundamental, valuable mental possession is the desire for the good (*Prot.* 358d, *Men.* 77d–e, *Euthyd.* 278e, *Gorg.* 468b). Like the Buddhist beginner's mind, this Socratic mindset is cultivated through continuous practice; it is not the mindset of a novice or total ignoramus. Those who can think like beginners are far advanced in their practice. Below, I will use "beginner's mind" to describe those who try to approach a topic with an uncluttered mind that is as free as possible of misconceptions and false attachments.

A beginner's mind disrupts our ordinary ways of thinking. It makes us think about issues from scratch, which allows us to see things in a fresh light. We can see this clearly in the *Laches*, where a beginner's mind unlocked new possibilities for inquiry on the topic of learning to fight in armor. At the beginning of the dialogue, the participants had one question—"Is it good to learn how to fight in armor?"—and they were entertaining two possible answers: yes or no. By the end of the dialogue, they have explored various questions and possible answers. Socrates not only helps Laches and Nicias see questions they had not seen before (most notably, "What is courage?"), he also helps them see new possible answers (namely, "Courage is wisdom").

In the business world, this leadership style of regularly shaking things up is called "disruptive leadership." John Seely Brown, former chief scientist of Xerox Corporation, highly values disruptive leadership. He proudly calls himself the "chief of confusion" and explains that he routinely adopts a beginner's mind: "I find that every couple of years now I have to re-frame how I even think about using [my] technology," Brown says. "And that only comes about by using Beginner's Mind, and asking all kinds of fundamental questions. Through questioning, I eventually realize that the lenses I'm looking through to see the world around me are wrong—and that I have to construct a whole new frame of reference."⁴⁰ Socrates, the "gadfly" of the Athenians (*Apol.* 30e) whose questions stung and provoked, may have been the first disruptive leader.

Those who think like beginners are comfortable with not knowing. Thus, we can see both Socrates (*Lach.* 186d–e, 200e–201b) and Zen Buddhists⁴¹ openly disavowing knowledge. Paul Bennett at IDEO sees this as an important asset: “I position myself relentlessly as an idiot at IDEO. . . . And that’s not a negative, it’s a positive. Because being comfortable with not knowing—that’s the first part of being able to question.”⁴² The more we think we know—the more mental possessions we accumulate—the more limited we become in our ways of thinking. To those who hoard knowledge and cling to beliefs, only certain questions seem worth asking and only certain answers worth exploring. Their mental possessions thus limit what is thinkable, reasonable, and possible. As Suzuki explains, “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few.”⁴³

How can we cultivate a beginner’s mind in our students? Both Socratic questioning and Buddhist meditation foster a beginner’s mind by prompting us to take inventory of our mental possessions; however, both practices take extended time, and Socratic questioning works best one-on-one. Thus, these exercises are difficult to facilitate in the classroom. I will present an exercise that combines aspects of Socratic and Buddhist practices and that allows an entire class to experience the value of thinking like a beginner. I propose that we can cultivate a beginner’s mind by looking at art in the way Amy Herman discusses in her book *Visual Intelligence* and her class “The Art of Perception.”

Herman’s exercise is simple: take a look at the painting on the right (Figure 1) and simply describe what you see.⁴⁴ Describe all the objects on the table. How many are there? Where are they? If you count five objects—a fork, a knife, a plate with a flat something on it that has an eye in the middle, a glass, and a bottle—great! Keep looking. Take your time.

Do you see that the glass is empty, the bottle is full, and the fork is flipped over? What kind of food is on the plate? A pancake? Look more closely. Don’t rush. We can see thin white strains of fat that get thicker toward the edges. It looks like a piece of ham. Did you notice the stain on the glass?

“You don’t have to be an art historian to talk about what you see,” Herman stresses.⁴⁵ In fact, it is better to have no training and no beliefs or assumptions about art history,

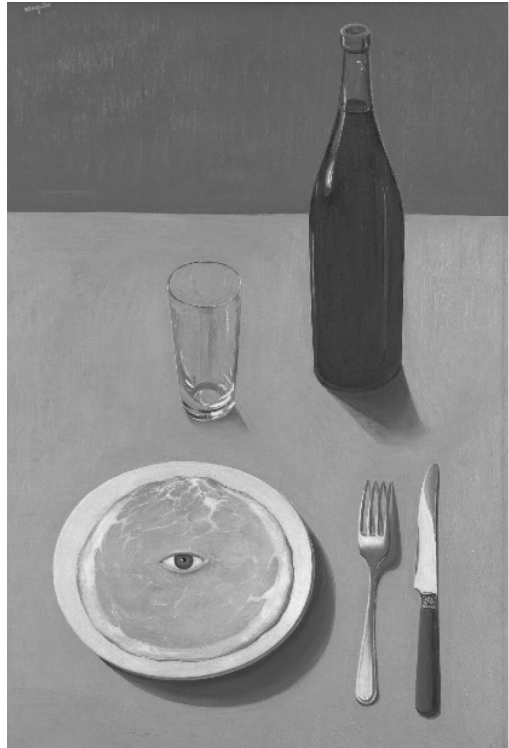


Figure 1

brushstrokes, and palettes. In other words, the idea is to approach the painting with a beginner's mind. Let go of your beliefs and just observe. *What do you see?*

Let's look at the painting again, even more closely. "Savor the stain on the side of the glass. Puzzle over whether or not everything is really on a table. Notice the light reflecting off the surface of the bottle, glass, and silverware. Calculate which direction the object's shadows are pointing. What could be causing the reflection and shadows, and where would we look for such an object? Appreciate how an image that might seem simple at first glance is really a complex series of relationships—*why is the bottle full if the glass is already stained?*"⁴⁶ That's puzzling, isn't it? The longer we observe, the more details and questions we uncover.

Herman's way of engaging with art is meditative. She asks us to mono-task and slow down. When meditating on a painting (or a question), we should try to stay attentive, letting our thoughts come and go without focusing on arriving at conclusions (or answers). As in meditation, we repeat the same activity over and over. *Look again. What else do you see?* To fully absorb details, Jennifer Roberts, an art history professor at Harvard, "requires her students to sit before a painting for three full hours."⁴⁷

At the end of the day, though, nothing compares to a second set of eyes. "We all see things differently" — we all have blind spots.⁴⁸ Thus, we need to collaborate, asking someone else to look with us and correct our false perceptions. "Most people . . . are unaware of being unaware,"⁴⁹ or as Socrates would put it, most people don't know that they don't know. We tend to jump to conclusions—*there's a pancake on the plate*—and not to question certain assumptions—*all the objects are on a table*. Becoming aware of our own perceptual and intellectual blind spots by engaging with what others see further helps us acquire a beginner's mind.

Herman's exercise allows us to experience the value of thinking like a beginner: when we approach a painting with an uncluttered mind, we can "see" questions and puzzling details that remain hidden to others. Herman stresses the importance of paying attention to details in all areas of work: "Small details can solve crimes. Small details can lead to significant diagnoses. Small details reveal big things."⁵⁰ As Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple and Zen student of Kobun Chino Otogawa (himself a student of Shunryū Suzuki), explained, "When you ask creative people how they did something, they feel a little guilty because they didn't really do it, they just *saw* something."⁵¹

While many of us cling to our beliefs and think of ourselves as knowledgeable, Socrates approaches problems with an open, inquiring mind. I have proposed that this Socratic mindset is similar to what Zen Buddhist Shunryū Suzuki calls a "beginner's mind." Thinking about the Socratic mindset in terms of a beginner's mind allows us to see more clearly the value of this mindset for leadership. A beginner's mind questions and disrupts; it thereby fuels creativity and innovation, which makes this mindset highly valued in the business world. We saw that thinking like a beginner is a skill that must be acquired—the total ignoramus who asks random questions does not disrupt in a productive way. Socratic leaders, I propose, are good at disrupting productively because they identify the right questions to ask, see the bigger picture, and stay focused on their purpose; in other words, they

are advanced in the skills of thinking in questions and being on a mission. Thus, the Socratic leadership skill of thinking like a beginner encompasses the skills of thinking in questions and being on a mission. I have proposed that Herman's exercise is particularly well-suited to cultivate beginner's minds in the classroom: it combines aspects of Socratic and Buddhist practices—it is meditative and collaborative, and it fosters (perceptual) humility—while allowing all students to experience the value of thinking with an uncluttered mind.

CONCLUSION

This paper took Socrates in Plato's early dialogues as the starting point for developing three leadership skills that are still relevant for us today: being on a mission, thinking in questions, and thinking like a beginner. I arrived at these Socratic leadership skills through an interdisciplinary investigation that put Socrates in conversation with a diverse group of thinkers—modern-day business leaders Paul Bennett and John Seely Brown, leadership coach Simon Sinek, educators Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana, Zen Buddhist Shunryū Suzuki, and art historian Amy Herman. Engaging with these thinkers alongside Socrates showed that Socratic leadership skills are highly applicable today and in real demand in the business world, and it allowed me to identify concrete exercises that can help anyone acquire these skills. I proposed that Socratic leadership is more inclusive, applicable, and inspiring than the model of leadership that interpreters of Plato's dialogues often celebrate: the leadership of the philosopher king. The philosopher king uses a *top-down* approach: he organizes society in the way that he knows is best. Thus, he seems to be a manager more than a leader. In contrast, the Socratic leadership style is *bottom-up*: it is inherently collaborative and, at least in principle, open to anyone whose questions inspire us to pursue a shared goal that is truly worth pursuing—the good life.⁵²

ENDNOTES

1. Quoted in Jeremy Caplan, "Google's Chief Looks Ahead," *Time*, October 2, 2006, <https://content.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1541446,00.html>

2. Warren Berger, *A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 8.

3. I am deeply grateful to Andrew Cutrofello, Gina Lebkuecher, Nick Smith, Marta Heckel, John Proios, Peter Osorio, and Ian Hensley for invaluable feedback on earlier versions of this paper. I also benefitted greatly from discussing my ideas with Bret Davis as well as the conference participants of Plato 2022 and the Teaching Hub Poster Presentation at the Central APA in 2/2020.

4. Eric Weiner, "The Business Advice Socrates Would Give If He Wrote a Management Book Today," *Fortune*, August 25, 2020, <https://fortune.com/2020/08/25/socrates-business-management-advice-philosophy/>; Alison Wood Brooks and Leslie K. John, "The Surprising Power of Questions," *Harvard Business Review* 96, no. 3 (2018), <https://hbr.org/2018/05/the-surprising-power-of-questions>; Cheryl B. McMillan, "Why the Socratic Method Is

One of Your Best Leadership Tools," Cheryl B. McMillan: *Elevating Consciousness in Leaders* (blog), October 30, 2018, <https://www.cherylmcmillan.com/why-the-socratic-method-is-one-of-your-best-leadership-tools/>; Anthony Vicino, "Socratic Management Techniques for the Modern Leader," *Medium*, March 29, 2018, <https://medium.com/swlh/socratic-management-techniques-for-the-modern-leader-f43d9a50caad>; Matthew MacLachlan, "Disruptive Leadership," LinkedIn, October 21, 2016, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/disruptive-leadership-matthew-maclachlan>.

5. McMillan, "Why the Socratic Method Is One of Your Best Leadership Tools."

6. By Plato's "early dialogues," I mean *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Charmides*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Euthydemus*, *Meno*, *Protagoras*, *Ion*, *Hippias Minor* and *Major*, *Gorgias*, and *Republic I*. For this common classification, see, e.g., Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, *Socratic Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 18. By "Socrates," I mean the literary character in these dialogues.

7. See, e.g., Dominic Scott and R. Edward Freeman, *Models of Leadership in Plato and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

8. One might worry that Socrates would object to applying his leadership skills to the business world. After all, one might argue that the goal of business is to make money, and Socrates famously tries to turn his interlocutors away from money and toward psychological excellence and living well (*Apol.* 41e, *Euthyd.* 306d–e). I offer two responses to this concern. First, while psychological excellence is Socrates' goal, he often uses his interlocutor's existing desires to spark their initial interest in philosophy. Alcibiades, for example, becomes interested in philosophy because Socrates promises he can help Alcibiades become great, known, and powerful (*Alc.* 105a–e). Likewise, Socrates might prompt business people's interest in philosophy by promising that Socratic leadership skills can help them turn a profit. In practicing these leadership skills, they might slowly realize that their real benefit and true profit lies in improving their souls and becoming better at living well (though success is not guaranteed, as the case of Alcibiades shows). Second, Socrates is not fundamentally hostile toward money. While he reports being poor (*Apol.* 37c, 38b) and considers the skill of money-making (*chrematistike*) irrelevant for the good life, Socrates does not share Plato's more radical view in the *Republic* that money-making is incompatible with the good life; see Anna Schrieffl, *Platons Kritik an Geld und Reichtum* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2013). For Socrates, it seems, money-making—like other professions—can be harmful, but it can also be conducive to human flourishing if it is subordinated to and guided by philosophy (*Gorg.* 517a–519b). Likewise, money is neither good nor bad in itself (*Euthyd.* 280d–281e). It is good for us if used wisely and bad for us if used ignorantly. As long as we make money to live and do not live to make money, Socrates might say, money-making is unproblematic (compare this to "Socrates eats to live, not lives to eat," Diogenes Laertius 2.34).

9. Scott and Freeman, *Models of Leadership*; T. Takala, "Plato on Leadership," *Journal of Business Ethics* 17, no. 7 (1998): 785–98; Sherwin Klein, "Plato's 'Statesman' and the Nature of Business Leadership: An Analysis from an Ethical Point of View," *Journal of Business Ethics* 7, no. 4 (1988): 283–94.

10. Stelios Zyglidopoulos, "On Becoming and Being an Ethical Leader: A Platonic Interpretation," *Journal of Business Ethics* 173, no. 1 (2021): 1–11; Paul T. Harper, "The Symbolic Imagination: Plato and Contemporary Business Ethics," *Journal of Business Ethics* 168 (2019): 5–21; David C. Bauman, "Plato on Virtuous Leadership: An Ancient Model for Modern Business," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2018): 251–74; Thad Williamson, "The Good Society and the Good Soul: Plato's *Republic* on Leadership," *The Leadership Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (2008): 397–408.

11. Santiago Mejia, "Socratic Ignorance and Business Ethics," *Journal of Business Ethics* 175, no. 3 (2022): 537–53.

12. In addition, some have argued that the Socratic method can be helpful when teaching business ethics to undergraduate students; see Kevin Morrell, "Socratic Dialogue as a Tool for Teaching Business Ethics," *Journal of Business Ethics* 53, no. 4 (2004): 383–92; M. Francis Reeves, "The Gadfly Business Ethics Project," *Journal of Business Ethics* 13, no. 8 (1994): 609–14; Michael J. Kerlin, "From Kerlin's Pizzeria to MJK Reynolds: A Socratic and Cartesian Approach to Business Ethics," *Journal of Business Ethics* 16, no. 3 (1997): 275–78. Others have proposed that Socratic dialogue can increase the moral accountability of managers; see Hans Bolten, "Managers Develop Moral Accountability: The Impact of Socratic Dialogue," *Philosophy of Management* 1, no. 3 (2001): 21–34; Carol Anne Bennett, Jane Anderson, and Petia Sice, "Reflections on Socratic Dialogue I: The Theoretical Background in a Modern Context," *Philosophy of Management* 14, no. 3 (2015): 159–69.

13. Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone To Take Action* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 39.

14. Quoted in Justin Daab, "Want More Innovation? Change Your Mission Statement," *Forbes*, November 6, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2017/11/06/want-more-innovation-change-your-mission-statement/>.

15. Sinek, *Start with Why*, 226.

16. Sinek, 6. For more on this understanding of leadership, see Paul Woodruff, *Garden of Leaders: Revolutionizing Higher Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1: "Leadership is what it takes to bring a free community to pursue a goal, its members willingly sharing that goal . . . leadership is the one form of power that is compatible with total freedom and equality." See also Nannerl O. Keohane, *Thinking about Leadership* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 23: "Leaders determine or clarify goals for a group of individuals and bring together the energies of members of that group to accomplish those goals."

17. One might worry that Socrates would deny being a leader because, in short, a true leader must be virtuous, and Socrates denies having virtue. Virtue—the craft of living well—includes the competency of pursuing the right goals. The true leader, as we saw above, leads people toward goals that are worth pursuing. Thus, it seems that the Socratic leader must be virtuous. The question "Is Socrates a leader?" then becomes "Is Socrates virtuous?" While I cannot discuss this much-debated question here to any satisfactory extent, I would like to at least outline a possible answer. In short, I propose that while Socrates would deny being called an expert and teacher of leadership (just as he denies being an expert and teacher of virtue, *Apol.* 33a), he would agree that he is an "apprentice" in the craft of leadership with a certain level of competency in turning people toward the right goals (just as he would agree that he is an "apprentice" in the craft of virtue with a certain degree of knowing how to live well, which allows him to practice the craft of virtue to some, albeit limited, degree, as Smith has argued); see Nicholas D. Smith, *Socrates on Self-Improvement: Knowledge, Virtue, and Happiness* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021). Socrates would consider himself at least an apprentice in leadership because he believes that he can make people "happy" (*eudaimon*, *Apol.* 36e). If leadership is the craft of leading people toward goals that are worth pursuing, and if happiness is the ultimate goal worth pursuing, then the Socrates of the *Apology* would claim to be a leader with at least some level of competency.

18. In the *Apology*, Socrates explains that his mission is divine in origin. He questions the Athenians about their way of life as service to the god, who, through the oracle at Delphi, told Chaerephon that no one was wiser than Socrates (*Apol.* 20e–21a, 23a–b,

29d–30b, 30e–31b, 33c, 38a). For a discussion of the divine origin of Socrates' mission, see Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, "The Origin of Socrates' Mission," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44, no. 4 (1983): 657–66; C. D. C. Reeve, *Socrates in the Apology: An Essay on Plato's Apology of Socrates* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989); Mark L. McPherran, "Socrates and the Duty to Philosophize," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24, no. 4 (1986): 541–60; James Doyle, "Socrates and the Oracle," *Ancient Philosophy* 24, no. 1 (2004): 19–36.

19. Sinek, *Start with Why*, 101.

20. Berger, *A More Beautiful Question*, 162.

21. While the Socratic *question-finding process* does not always lead to a "what" question, "what" questions play some role in many Socratic conversation. For a helpful discussion of what exactly Socrates is getting at when he asks "What is x?" see Justin C. Clark, "Socrates, the Primary Question, and the Unity of Virtue," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 45, no. 4 (2015): 445–70; Justin C. Clark, "Socratic Inquiry and the 'What-Is-F?' Question," *European Journal of Philosophy* 26, no. 4 (2018): 1324–42; Hugh H. Benson, "Socratic Method," in *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*, ed. Donald R. Morrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 193–98.

22. Bennett, in an interview with *Survival of the Fastest* on 05/12/09 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEILGz69KAK>).

23. Bennett, as quoted in an IDEO blog post (<https://www.ideo.com/blogs/inspiration/advice-from-ideo-s-chief-creative-officer-on-inspiring-creative-work>).

24. Berger, *A More Beautiful Question*, 93.

25. Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana, *Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2018), 1.

26. *Ibid.*, 1.

27. *Ibid.*, 28.

28. *Ibid.*, 47.

29. Gregory Vlastos, "The Socratic Elenchus," in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 1983, 38–39.

30. Vlastos, "The Socratic Elenchus."

31. Hugh H. Benson, "The Problem of the Elenchus Reconsidered," *Ancient Philosophy* 7 (1987): 67–85. Further, interpreters disagree on whether Socratic conversations are even "elenctic" (Tarrant) or follow a certain method (Brickhouse and Smith); see Harold Tarrant, "Elenchos and Exetasis: Capturing the Purpose of Socratic Interrogation," in *Does Socrates Have a Method? Rethinking the Elenchus in Plato's Dialogues and Beyond*, ed. Gary Alan Scott (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2002), 61–77; Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, "The Socratic Elenchos?," in *Does Socrates Have a Method? Rethinking the Elenchus in Plato's Dialogues and Beyond*, ed. Gary Alan Scott (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 145–57. For a very helpful overview of the debate, see David Wolfsdorf, "Socratic Philosophizing," in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Socrates*, ed. John Bussanich and Nicholas D. Smith (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 34–67. For further discussion, see Benson, "Socratic Method."

32. Shunryū Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, ed. Trudy Dixon (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2011), 101.

33. For a very helpful discussion of the beginner's mind, its centrality in Zen Buddhism, and how meditation fosters a beginner's mind, see Bret W. Davis, *Zen Pathways: An Introduction to the Philosophy and Practice of Zen Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), especially Chapters 2 and 3.

34. Davis, *Zen Pathways*, 27–28.

35. Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki, eds., *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 1957), 7.

36. Bret W. Davis, “Forms of Emptiness in Zen,” in *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 191.

37. Davis, *Zen Pathways*, 71.

38. While some interpreters have noticed similarities between Socratic and Zen Buddhist practices, the connection between Socratic conversations and the beginner’s mind has remained unnoticed. See Davis, *Zen Pathways*, 20–24; Tadeusz Adam Ożóg, “The Zen Master Socrates,” *Idea-Studia Nad Strukturą i Rozwojem Pojęć Filozoficznych* XXIV (2012): 233–53; Stephanie E. Hake, “How and Why to Analogize Socratic Questioning to Zen Buddhist Koan Practice,” *SOCRATES* 2, no. 3 (2014): 27–45.

39. As Adams puts it, Socrates “accepts that all the evidence does not infallibly prove” that his conclusions and courses of action are right. On my reading, Socrates is not a dogmatist. In principle, any belief is up for examination and will have to be discarded if we lack good reasons for it. Don Adams, “Elenchos and Evidence,” *Ancient Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (1998): 294.

40. Brown in an interview with Berger; Warren Berger, “Can Questioning Help Us To Keep Up in ‘Exponential Times?’,” *A More Beautiful Question* (blog), <https://amorebeautifulquestion.com/can-questioning-help-keep-up-exponential-times/>. That businesses are seeking input from philosophers who disrupt our common ways of thinking is also supported by the recent trends “for companies to hire their own in-house philosophers” (Percy) and for philosophers to offer their “gadfly-for-hire” services (Coren), as Mejia has noted. Sally Percy, “Why Your Board Needs a Chief Philosophy Officer,” *Forbes*, March 9, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sallypercy/2018/03/09/why-your-board-needs-a-chief-philosophy-officer/>; Michael J. Coren, “Silicon Valley Executives Are Hiring Philosophers to Teach Them to Question Everything,” *Quartz*, April 18, 2017, <https://qz.com/956682/philosopher-andrew-taggart-is-helping-silicon-valley-executives-define-success/>; Mejia, “Socratic Ignorance and Business Ethics,” 547.

41. Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, 72–73; Davis, *Zen Pathways*, 47.

42. Berger, *A More Beautiful Question*, 79–80. One might worry that a beginner’s mind is detrimental to business leadership because it is a time-consuming practice that might lead to nothing but puzzlement or, even worse, inaction. Once we think like a beginner, the worry goes, we might be paralyzed, unable to decide on any course of action and incapable of getting anything done. This so-called *apraxia* charge (the charge of “inaction”) has commonly been brought against skeptics, such as Pyrrhonian skeptics. In response, we might explain that, in the case of Socrates, adopting a beginner’s mind clearly did not lead to inaction. Although Socratic conversations usually led to puzzlement, Socrates went on to live an active life. He participated in Athenian public life; he served as a member of the Council (*Apol.* 32b), although he generally tried to stay out of politics (*Apol.* 31d), and he fought in the Peloponnesian war (*Charm.* 153a–c). Socrates also maintained a family (*Apol.* 41e) and friendships—and so did Shunryū Suzuki. Neither Socrates nor Suzuki was doomed to inaction. We can explain why by referring back to Suzuki’s guide to uncluttering our minds. Once we have taken everything out of our mind and examined it, we may bring it back in if it is necessary to keep it. Those who adopt a beginner’s mind do not live without beliefs or desires; their minds are not literally empty (as I explained above). Rather, they have adopted a different attitude toward their mental possessions. They do not cling to them, or, as Socrates might put it, they reassess the merit of their beliefs and desires throughout their lives. See Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, 101.

43. Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, 1. Suzuki's caution against expertise is compatible with Socrates' quest to find an expert. Socrates and Suzuki have two different kinds of experts in mind. Suzuki's expert is our ordinary expert, someone who has accumulated a vast amount of knowledge or information in a certain area and "hoards" that knowledge; see Suzuki, 73. Socrates' expert, by contrast, is the expert in the craft of virtue, that is, on how to live well; this expert does not hoard knowledge but continues to test his beliefs throughout his life. For, as Socrates says in the *Apology*, "the greatest good for a man" — which I read as applying to all men, including the expert—"is to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for men" (*Apol.* 38a). Socrates' expert in virtue continues to examine himself and others. In doing so, he continues to cultivate a beginner's mind.

44. Amy Herman, *Visual Intelligence: Sharpen Your Perception, Change Your Life* (Boston: Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 34–35. The painting is *Le Portrait* by René Magritte (1935).

45. Herman, *Visual Intelligence*, 12.

46. *Ibid.*, 34.

47. *Ibid.*, 19.

48. *Ibid.*, 41.

49. *Ibid.*, 94–95.

50. *Ibid.*, 67.

51. Steve Jobs in an interview with Gary Wolf for *Wired* on 02/01/96 (<https://www.wired.com/1996/02/jobs-2/>).

52. On my reading, Socrates genuinely seeks to test his own beliefs and tries to make progress by collaborating with others. I propose that this collaborative reading of Socrates is compatible with his use of offensive discourse — shame and ridicule — in some conversations. Some of his interlocutors are so full of false attachments, one might say, that Socrates must use radical ways to unclutter their minds.