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COMMENTARY
Palaima: What would Socrates think about our democracy today?

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The Greek philosopher Socrates was put to death in 399 B.C.E. by Athenian citizens who desperately wanted conformity in political, ethical and religious thinking. Socrates was deeply suspicious of the written word and of long speeches. He said that written texts could not answer his questions, and that he could not stop speeches in progress and probe their assertions, assumptions, logic and rhetoric.

We all have had his experience. Like Socrates, by the end of a speech, we often have forgotten what was said at the beginning.

What would Socrates think about how we today, as citizens of a democracy, communicate with one another about important issues?

I have just finished reading with students in University of Texas' renowned summer intensive Greek class Plato's account of the defense Socrates made when on trial for his life. I have also finished reviewing two books on Socrates: Luis E. Navia, "Socrates: A Life Examined," and Emily Wilson, "The Death of Socrates: Hero, Villain, Chatterbox, Saint." The books will get you thinking about what lessons Socrates might have for us in a society whose principles of open exchange of ideas and transparency of information within government have been altered, some would say seriously threatened, by the changes in our laws and in our public mindset since 9/11.

I began my reading deeply suspicious of Socrates and the main source for his thought, Plato. An undergraduate Greek mentor had made me so. Three Athenian citizens had accused Socrates of corrupting the young male citizens of Athens through his teachings. He also stood accused of not believing in the gods in which other Athenians believed. My mentor's influence on me made me feel what some Athenians felt about Socrates.

What comes across, however, in Plato's "Apology," as the defense speech is known, is Socrates' deep commitment to discovering the essence of virtues like honor, courage and religious piety, and his unshakable belief that our discussions will get nowhere unless we are committed to understanding ethical behavior by being precise with language and the meaning of words. He believed that knowing virtue makes it impossible not to follow virtue.

Socrates would rightly be deeply suspicious of the large lecture classes that are the norm at UT and of commentary pieces like the very one you are reading.

His preferred alternative was known as the elenchus, a word related to the root elakh, and conveying the sense of a process of "belittling" and "publicly shaming" individuals through examination of the usually faulty reasoning behind their opinions and beliefs.

There are three necessary conditions. First, the individuals concerned - columnists, readers, professors, students, journalists, government officials - must care enough to scrutinize their own views and ethics rationally. Second, we have to have the opportunity to do this. Third, we have to take different perspectives seriously.

Look around. In government, universities and corporate culture, all three conditions are sorely missing. Dell Inc. dodges around personal ethics by attributing deceptive accounting practices, even post-Enron, to an environment in which manipulations were viewed as acceptable devices. Socrates, called by the poet Shelley "the Jesus Christ of Greece," would have a field day with the company's language and ethical values.

Departing U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales avoids elenchus by claiming amnesia about actions taken by his office. Our presidential primary debates are a mind-numbing series of calculated sound bites. Conservatives watch Fox News and read National Review and The Wall Street Journal. Liberals watch "The Daily Show" and read American Prospect and The New York Times.

This is no way to behave in a healthy democracy. Of course, the death of Socrates, prompted by the deep resentments and political suspicions that his methods aroused in the public and in public figures, makes clear that no democracy is ever healthy enough.

As long as sound bites and controversy sell, politics is a divisive advertising game, and our brightest students never explore interactively deep problems relating to the human condition, our country will remain addicted to soft intellectual entertainment, and we will continue to feel "we" are right and "they" are wrong.

And it will all seem OK, so long as we never subject ourselves, through the process of elenchus, to being embarrassed by our own ignorance.

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